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Grotesque and Excremental Humour:  
Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

Volume I of 3 Volumes

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## GROTESQUE AND EXCREMENTAL HUMOUR: MONTY PYTHON'S MEANING OF LIFE.

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## SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

The thesis represents an attempt to bring together theoretical and empirical work on (grotesque/excremental) humour. The first two sections are consequently concerned with the history and theorisation of the grotesque/excremental and with the prevalent ways of analysing the comedic. It was decided that a 'history' of Monty Python would constitute too long a digression, and so only a brief account of Terry Gilliam's links with the grotesque is included.

Two further section then deal with some of the research on the comedic which has been done and with audience research methodologies. It is worth noting a shift which took place in the course of work on this thesis, from a concern with highly individuated responses (reflecting the centrality of psychoanalytic explications of the comedic) to an eventual decision to concentrate on a 'reader-response' approach. The rationale for this shift is discussed in Section 5, and briefly in Section 6.

The empirical heart of the research is, then, an analysis of a transcript of six hours of taped interviews/discussions about responses to Monty Python's *Meaning of Life*. These are supplemented by the results of Humour Appreciation Tests and Mood Adjective Check Lists administered under standard conditions to the respondents watching the film.

While there can be no question of 'proof', particularly in a field in which psychoanalytic mechanisms are arguably crucial, results of the empirical study indicate that the humour of *Meaning of Life* functions to reduce anxiety, and that the mechanism by which this occurs conforms to a Freudian repression model. Over and above this, however, - the work of David Morley and Janice Radway is worth evoking here - the detailed account of audience response also furnishes data for further enquiry about how and why 'real' respondents do or do not find grotesque and excremental humour 'funny'.

## Introduction.

"Humour (is) the most exquisitely dull and stupefyingly uninteresting topic known to man, the Law of Real Property not excepted ..." - John Cleese<sup>1</sup>

The idea for this research was informed by at least two areas of interest: first the work which I had done on the comedic for an MA dissertation,<sup>2</sup> and, second, an interest in the popularity of Monty Python. These two were then linked by a concern for historical specificity and some degree of analytical rigour, products of a scientific training and of the kind of original-source research encouraged at the Polytechnic of London.

Whilst the Monty Python films (particularly Meaning of Life, 1983) and the ways in which they function remain of focal interest, I have found myself drawn into a study of the history of manners, of attitudes to the 'unclean', and of the origins of and developments in notions of the grotesque; this historical/theoretical material will constitute the first section of this thesis.

The second section will be concerned with theories of comedy/humour/pleasure, and particularly with excremental and other 'taboo' areas. At this point a first central problematic will be introduced, that of the 'immanence',<sup>3</sup> or otherwise of comedicity. It will emerge that humour/funniness can only be discovered through a reading subject's negotiation of potentially comedic elements in a text; yet this will only beg the (even bigger) question of how such negotiation is effected. The axiomatic term here will be the unconscious, in relation both to the individual topography of symbolisation, repression, sublimation etc. and to the maintenance of social-subject positioning through various ideological oper-

ations. While this will enable us to theorise the effectivity of humour and other pleasures with a fair degree of coherence, the notion of the unconscious can already alert us to the difficulties which will accompany our empirical project. We shall be examining the interface of the articulable and the inarticulable, and the problem is going to be: can we gain access to the inarticulable? Short of psychoanalysing the respondents in the empirical project, what can we learn about what they cannot articulate?

The parenthetical and severely curtailed third section will look very briefly at the influence of Terry Gilliam's animation style on the development of a grotesque/excremental strand in the comedicity of Monty Python.

In the fourth and fifth sections we shall be moving towards a methodology for some empirical research on a Meaning of Life audience. First we shall review some of the more self-consciously 'scientific' experimental/empirical work which has been done on sexual, aggressive and absurd humour and make some comments about the appropriateness or otherwise of the approaches used. We shall then turn to some audience research based on interview methods, and consider the reader-response model developed by Janice Radway<sup>4</sup> for studying the readers of romance novels.

Finally, in the sixth and most voluminous section, we shall elucidate and activate our own audience research model. This will turn out to be primarily interview-based, but with some additional quantifying 'gadgets' drawn from the research literature. As in the work published by David Morley,<sup>5</sup> the emphasis will be on a descrip-

tive account of viewers' responses, heuristically organized under a number of categories. While this will clearly represent a ceding of primacy to the articulable, an occasional symptomatic reading may nevertheless be possible with regard to that which cannot be articulated. In addition to this, and in the final pages of the section, the data from the more 'scientific' gadgets will enable us to make some pertinent, and perhaps less speculative, comments about the inarticulable in relation to Freudian notions of repression.

Given the nature of the quarry, then - the unconscious mechanisms by which particular respondents negotiate the comedic in general and Monty Python's Meaning of Life in particular -, there can be no question of 'proof' here. It will rather be a matter of making a modest addition to an understanding first of how certain kinds of comedic elements can be seen to be negotiated in particular instances, and, second, of what kinds of psychoanalytic and ideological functions such comedicity can fulfil.

1.

Sources of attitudes to the grotesque and the excremental.

"There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification."<sup>1</sup>

By way of introduction to this section, here are one or two further self-reflective remarks, particularly in relation to the specific subject-matter.

A number of potential obstacles to this kind of exercise are of interest. First, there is a degree of transgression on a personal level. If "dirt" is, as Mary Douglas puts it,

"... an omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems"

then "in focusing on it we run against our strongest mental habit."<sup>2</sup>

Douglas also refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's identification of the threat posed by stickiness/viscosity to the security of the solid/liquid dichotomy,<sup>3</sup> an idea which opens up a whole can of psychoanalytic considerations. Rather than myself undergo analysis here, I shall leave a discussion of some psychoanalytic aspects of excrement until a later subsection.

A second difficulty relates to the social: how to escape an air of pedantry when dealing with the excremental? Some of the material which I have used and shall refer to is in French, and the use of the words 'merde', 'stercus', 'ordure' etc. thus acquires an esoteric justification (apart from the relatively low shock-value possessed by 'merde' anyway, a fact the relevance of which should emerge below). In my use of English, I shall use the word 'shit'

rather than the overly pedantic 'faeces' or some other euphemism, 'excrement' being a more general term covering a variety of effluvia. In 'respectable' written form this will probably pass, but in answering casual questions like "What are you working on?" a quick assessment of the social context is crucial!

The problem of social attitudes to the study of, or indeed the mention of, the unclean has another aspect, linked to signification. Barthes wrote that

"... écrite, la merde ne sent pas."<sup>4</sup>

We shall observe below the links between the 'cleansing' of language and the (impulse towards) the physical cleaning of a filthy Paris; here we note that one function of a word is to conceal that which it represents (whether the 'pure' signified can ever be apprehended is another matter, but ...).

"... Plutarch defends with many reasons, in ... 'Symposiums', that where the matters themselves are often unpleasant to behold, their counterfeits are seen not without delectation."<sup>5</sup>

"Si nous disons ordure, ce nom est beaucoup plus noble que la chose signifiée ... car nous aimons mieux l'entendre que la sentir."<sup>6</sup>

Dominique Laporte<sup>7</sup> observes that whilst St. Augustine was satisfied with an evident hierarchy from the ordure/shit itself (more 'knowable') to the word for ordure/shit (less 'knowable' but to be preferred for that reason); Freud abolishes the distinction and maintains that the word is (was in his day) as taboo as the thing.

Thus

"quiconque étudie de telles choses se voit considéré comme à peine moins 'inconvenant' que celui qui fait réellement des choses inconvenantes."<sup>8</sup>

Even if this is not quite 'true' in social practice, it does remind me of the scientist researching selenium compounds who didn't have any friends ... It is worth noting at this point that contemporary attitudes to the excremental and the grotesque will be important in looking at audience reactions to The Meaning of Life. The subsections which follow will, one hopes, bring us nearer to an understanding of the grotesque/excremental in our contemporary culture.

### 1.1 The grotesque

Writing on the grotesque has been marked by its diversity but also by its bias towards literary formulations; typical debates concern the grotesqueness of characters in works by Sterne, Swift, Dickens, Baudelaire, Gogol. A good summary of the main 'theories' concerned with the grotesque is given by Michael Steig.<sup>9</sup> The picture which emerges through the work of Wolfgang Kayser, Arthur Clayborough, John Ruskin, Lee Byron Jennings, Lewis Lawson and Norman Holland is of the gradual development of more sophisticated formulations of the grotesque as occupying a position somewhere between the uncanny/frightening and the laughable, in Ruskin's words "a combination of the fearful and the ludicrous".

In Steig's words:

"The grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic.

When the infantile material is primarily threatening, comic techniques, including caricature, diminish the threat through degradation or ridicule; but at the same time they may also enhance anxiety through their aggressive implications and the strangeness they lend the threatening figure.



In the 'comic-grotesque', the comic in its various forms lessens the threat of identification with infantile drives by means of ridicule; at the same time, it lulls inhibitions and makes possible on a preconscious level the same identification that it appears to the conscious/superego to prevent."<sup>10</sup> (original emphasis)

Whilst such a definition of the grotesque may be fruitful in narrowly text-based studies of, say, Dickens or Kafka, it is not a very satisfying starting-point for a study of the imagery of

"... a landscape littered with the usual Pythonesque rubbish of severed limbs, squashed animals, unspeakable victuals and grisly instruments."<sup>11</sup>

While not denying the operation of unconscious defence mechanisms in both the construction and the consumption of such grotesque images, one is driven to ask what the cultural/historical determinants could be for such a choice of images/preoccupations (more of Terry Gilliam later). Some clues which may be worth following are given by Mikhail Bakhtin.

The notions developed by Bakhtin in discussing Rabelaisian literature which are important here are those of the "material bodily principle" and of "grotesque realism". Bakhtin is at pains to stress that much of the mediaeval literature (and in particular that of Rabelais) which uses gross images of excessive physicality has been misinterpreted:

"... according to the narrow and modified meaning which modern ideology, especially that of the 19th century, attributed to 'materiality' and 'the body'."<sup>12</sup>

"In grotesque realism ... the bodily element is deeply positive. ... The body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all the body

becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable."<sup>13</sup>

The remarks about individualized physiology and the bourgeois ego are significant and will occupy us below; first let us look again at what is meant by this "grotesque realism".

One aspect of grotesque realism was the transfer of all that was spiritual/ideal/abstract to an earthly/bodily sphere:

"The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materialises."<sup>14</sup>

(Note in passing one of Henri Bergson's characteristics of the comedic: materialisation/mechanisation of the human - "the mechanical encrusted upon the living" -, as when a body such as Buster Keaton's seems to go out of control. It is a mark of Bergson's 'Christian humanism' that he would not have included Bakhtin's 'degradation' under his definition of the laughable) (cf. pg.68 below).

Degradation in this case

"... relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth ... degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerative one."<sup>15</sup>

The regenerative principle is also extended to death: in death there is the potential for new life; it is a matter of "a pregnant death, a death that gives birth."<sup>16</sup>

The second, more specific component of grotesque realism is the "grotesque body", a body in contact with the cosmos, with a stress

on those parts open to communication with the outside world: the mouth, anus, hands, feet, breasts, nose. It is through these points of contact with the cosmos that

"the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking and defecation."<sup>17</sup>

This cosmic transcendence of the atomistic body is, incidentally, noted by Pierre Bonaffé in the more modern psychoanalytic context:

"There is indeed a fragmenting of the body, but not at all with a feeling of loss or degradation. Quite to the contrary, as much for the holder as for the others, the body is fragmented by multiplication: the others no longer have to do with a simple person, but with a man to the x+y+z power whose life has been immeasurable increased, dispersed while being united with other natural forces ..., since its existence no longer rests at the centre of its person, but has hidden itself in several far-off and impregnable locations."<sup>18</sup> (original emphasis)

Visual expressions of the kind of body described by Bakhtin included frescoes and bas-reliefs of 12th and 13th century churches and cathedrals, and the paintings of Bosch and Breughel. In view of Terry Gilliam's evident (conscious) appropriation of some of the imagery of these painters, such a notion of the grotesque body - "you can go into magnificent churches and find carvings of people doing really gross things"<sup>19</sup> - is obviously relevant. Gilliam's animations frequently favour exaggerated excrescences, long noses, sprouting limbs-as-branches, enormous spots/blemishes, all-devouring mouths, and this list is very close to that furnished by Bakhtin in his description of the features of the grotesque body.<sup>20</sup>

"... the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body; the bowels and the phallus."<sup>21</sup>

Thus the grotesque body was defined by those features (especially the nose/phallus, the bowels, the mouth), which could take on a

degree of independent existence and transgress the boundaries separating the inside and the outside of the body, and which could express the regenerative, fundamentally erotic aspects of humanity.

Bodily secretions such as vomiting, urine and shit were also positive, regenerative substances:

"We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter ... If dung is a link between body and earth (the laughter that unites them), urine is a link between body and sea."<sup>22</sup>

In some ways they perhaps still are.

"Children of both sexes regard urine in its positive aspect as equivalent to their mother's milk, in accordance with the unconscious, which equates all bodily substances with one another."<sup>23</sup>

Rabelais' literature is particularly rich in celebrations of excessive eating and drinking, vomiting, prodigious floods of urine, etc. Again the imagery of, say, the peasant sequence at the start of Monty Python and the Holy Grail or the Fishfingers' evening meal in Jabberwocky is striking in this respect. The Meaning of Life also contains some instances of such latter-day grotesque realism; those relating most explicitly to the digestive functions would include the Meyer family's diet of suet, lard, fish-oil, butter-fat, dripping and wool-grease in the Martin Luther section (missing from some versions of the film) and, notoriously, the exploding Mr. Creosote of the central 'Autumn Years' section.

In this 'grotesque' conception of the body, the spiritual centre was to be located in the "material bodily lower stratum", in contrast to other (mostly subsequent) relocations of essence in the heart, in the brain, or at some other point in the head (e.g. the

pineal body just above the nose in the case of some Hindu sects; this point was also favoured by Descartes ...). The 'Untermensch' corresponding to this valoriation of the upper stratum can then be seen as a despised throwback to the mediaeval grotesque:

"A subhuman is a human of the nether regions, a person who is human even below. Men of the Right are human only on top; it is impossible to be a human being below."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, in Bakhtin's view, much of the scatological material in Rabelais' work (Gargantua's experiments in arse-wiping, Pantagruel's descent into the underworld) was a deliberate celebration of the primacy of the material bodily lower stratum over the Catholic/academic 'orthodoxy' of the day:

"The material bodily lower stratum ... liberates objects from the snares of false consciousness, from illusions and sublimations inspired by fear."<sup>25</sup>

It is going to be necessary, in any thorough-going study of audience-response to the grotesque/excremental in Monty Python films, to operate some notion of social or class positioning of the spectator. Some understanding of the class nature of the differential developments in the grotesque as outlined by Bakhtin is therefore also necessary. This is a difficult area in which my competence is slight, but it is worth some speculative work at this early stage.

The assumption underlying Bakhtin's formulation of the mediaeval grotesque is that it was a popular phenomenon, manifested most commonly in the folk culture of ritual spectacle, parodic verbal compositions, elaborate curses and oaths; these elements were in turn to be found most frequently in the various carnivals, festivals and saturnalia<sup>26</sup> which followed the church calendar but which were

systematically placed outside the church and religiosity. In keeping with the above grotesque notion of regeneration,

"Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal ... hostile to all that was immortalized and completed."<sup>27</sup>

It is not clear whether Bakhtin's carnival could ever define itself outside official prescription. For Terry Eagleton,

"Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture in hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool."<sup>28</sup> (original emphasis)

Prefiguring the observation, in Section 2 on comedy, on the rarity (impossibility?) of humour/comedy fulfilling an entirely oppositional function in conflict with dominant ideologies, Eagleton goes on:

"Carnival laughter is incorporative as well as liberating, the lifting of inhibitions politically enervating as well as disruptive. Indeed from one viewpoint carnival may figure as a prime example of that mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become a dominant theme of contemporary post-Marxist pessimism. Bakhtin's carnival ... is so clearly a licensed enclave ..."<sup>29</sup>

My own reading of Bakhtin does not discern such a clear dependency for carnival on official licence. It seems more likely that

"... for Bakhtin carnival ... was characterised by the inversion not just of everyday rules and behaviour, but of the dominant symbolic order ... a festival of discrowning in which the axial signifiers of mediaeval ideology were scandalously and often scatologically debased, tumbled down from heaven to earth, trampled over and sullied by the heavy material feet of the people's practice ..."<sup>30</sup>

Included in an excellent (and meticulously detailed) account of the (French) social history of smell and excrement by Alain Corbin is a description of carnivalesque 'revolt' which catches well the celebratory use of ordure. The coda, however, does maintain the reservation expressed by Eagleton.

"While aristocrats continued for some time to show relative indifference to the injunction ... of good conduct, the masses were set on publicly displaying their allegiance to filth. They proclaimed their prejudice in favour of degradation as opposed to sublimation, which was the aim of the bourgeoisie. Some scatological practices - such as throwing excrement and waste, which was a feature of Shrovetide battles, or farting audibly, sometimes with accompanying gestures - revealed the masses' desire to let off steam ...; unless these excesses were only temporary outlets, allowed as a concession by the disciplinary process in order to secure its own efficacy."<sup>31</sup>

The crucial 'event' which, it seems to me, exerted a determining influence on notions of the body (both grotesque and non-grotesque) - and, as we shall see in a later section, on attitudes to the excremental -, was the gradual development of capitalism in Western Europe.<sup>32</sup> As Richard Dyer points out,

"The rhetoric of capitalism insists that it is capital that makes things happen; capital has the magic property of growing, stimulating. What this conceals is the fact that it is human labour and, in the last instance, the labour of the body, that makes things happen ... Much of the cultural history of the past few centuries has been concerned with ways of making sense of the body, while disguising the fact that its predominant use has been as the labour of the majority in the interests of the few."<sup>33</sup>

It will no doubt be necessary to return to this at some point, but the aspects of capitalist development which are of interest here are alienation and the constitution of the subject as an atomised individual.

A pre-capitalist society would have been characterised by a relatively close link between the producer of a certain article and the community in which that article would be used:

"... this kind of society endowed all human activities with a large degree of unity, harmony and stability."<sup>34</sup>

Although some capitalist relations already existed in the time of which Bakhtin writes (14th-16th centuries), links between production

and communal life had not yet been severed, and it is certainly feasible to see the grotesque regenerative body, non-individuated and at one with the cosmos, as an expression of this communality.

By contrast,

"Modern alienation originates basically in the cleavage between the producer and his product, resulting both from the division of labour and commodity production."<sup>35</sup>

This physical cleavage of the producer from what he/she produces and from the community is accompanied by a different structuring of the way each person sees her/himself as an individual. Whereas previously the individual body was (at least in its grotesque, carnivalesque aspects) hardly to be differentiated from the surroundings (hence the exaggerated growth of features such as noses and penises, which could communicate with the cosmos), the 'modern' body is separate, atomised, entirely individuated. This in turn is not accidental but is the product of the different forms taken by the imaginary relation enjoyed by individual subject in relation to the social totality.<sup>36</sup> The individuated subject who lives his/her experience as a self-constituting entity is a necessary consequence of a capitalist system of social relations, necessary also in the sense that capitalism 'needs' individuals who will accept their alienation and who, if they do sense its existence, will shrug their shoulders and say "That's Life".

If we return to Bakhtin, we find that he has, indeed, identified this shift in the representation of the human body. For him, Renaissance literature saw the first widespread splitting of the private body from the 'universal body', with the positive regenerative aspects of the grotesque also diminishing:



"Two types of imagery reflecting the conception of the world here meet at crossroads; one of them ascends to the folk culture of humour, while the other is the bourgeois conception of the completed atomised being. The ever-growing, inexhaustible, ever-laughing principle which uncrowns and renews is combined with its opposite: the petty, inert 'material principle' of class society."<sup>37</sup>

Thus the Renaissance saw the development of canons according to which grotesque realism was "hideous and formless". Bakhtin goes on to discuss the development of the individual-grotesque and the Romantic grotesque in the 18th and 19th centuries, which saw a decline in visual representations of the grotesque, the transposing of the carnival spirit to a subjective idealist philosophy, the constipation of laughter into irony and sarcasm. Finally (and the Michael Steig summary (pg.7 above) becomes interesting here) this period saw the development of the terror dimension of the grotesque at the expense of any remaining bodily excesses:

"Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerative power and were turned into vulgarities."<sup>38</sup>

The most recent developments in the grotesque discussed by Bakhtin are an 'existential' grotesque (e.g. Jarry) which can be traced back to the Romantic tradition, and the 'realist grotesque' in which, interestingly, there has been some reappropriation (by Mann and Brecht among others) of elements of folk culture and carnival. These transformations have been complex, and a fuller understanding of their origins would involve a

"... political somatics, a study of the political-libidinal production of the historic body that attends not only, in negative fashion, to its past and present imprintings, but which may learn from such sources as Bakhtin something of its revolutionary potential."<sup>39</sup>

Remembering the origins of notions of individuality in the ideological forms engendered by particular socioeconomic formations

(cf. footnote 34 above), the signifying body, like the family, seems to occupy an 'absent space' between base and superstructure; its positions in relation to historical determinants and to its own effectivity are consequently the more difficult to get to grips with.

Let us, then, note some of the characteristics of the non-grotesque 'modern' body. The genitals, mouth and anus are relegated to a minor role, corresponding to the observed decline in any celebration of any regenerative power of these organs. Instead the major role is taken by the head, eyes, face, muscular system, expressive elements which act to fix the body's place in relation to the (fixed) outside world. Actions and events tend to be interpreted in relation to a single individuated life, again in contrast to the cosmic/interactionist folk interpretation of Rabelais' time. The grotesque imagery of Terry Gilliam's animations, or of the 'knight's (dismemberment) song' in Monty Python and the Holy Grail seems to stand in stark contrast to the giant hands, lips or bottom variously employed by Kenny Everett to create grotesque parodies of 'individuated' media personalities such as Mick Jagger and Rod Stewart. Indeed John Cleese and Graham Chapman did some writing for two series of Marty Feldman's Marty. When much of their work was not used for the second series (transmitted from 9th December 1968),

"... it became obvious that what Marty really wanted was star vehicle sketches, whereas we were still writing sketches with three or four equal parts.."40

Marty Feldman's success as individual comedian, being surely in considerable part due to his striking eyes, is another example of the head, the eyes and face as elements, acting to fix the modern

(atomised/alienated-within-capitalism) individual in relation to a world viewed as static, in contrast to the mouth, phallus and bowels as forming a link with a positive-regenerative pre-capitalist universe.

And the kind of laughter is probably different too.

## 1.2 Excrement and manners

"The mingled splendour and squalor of the Middle Ages almost passes belief."<sup>41</sup>

As a parallel to the previous section, and bearing in mind the concern to work towards an understanding of the class-differentiated nature of attitudes to the grotesque and the excremental, I would like to make some observations about the development of thresholds of 'decency' in relation to bodily functions, using material drawn mostly from Norbert Elias' 'The History of Manners'.<sup>42</sup> This material relates primarily to French and German sources, and this must be borne in mind in extrapolating any insights to include the situation in Britain.

What is initially striking is the relative lack of distinction (at least in modern terms) between the bodily habits of the ruling class of the 15th and 16th centuries and those of the people. Priceless expense tended to coexist with excrement and filth, and even in courtly circles

"A proper bath, according to Russell, seems to have been an event to be heralded with flowers, and resorted to chiefly as curative."<sup>43</sup>

Furnivall also observes that Henry VIII was obliged to create a law against "the filthy condition of servants in his own kitchen".

Equally striking in the early literature (up to the early 18th century in France, a little later in Germany) is the frankness and explicitness with which bodily functions are discussed, even when some activity is being proscribed:

"To hold back urine is harmful to health, to pass it in secret betokens modesty."<sup>44</sup>

This explicitness is not confined to the 'educators' and chroniclers of social habits, moreover; in an (admittedly) private letter to a friend, the Duchess of Orléans wrote on the 9th October 1694:

"Vous êtes bien heureuse d'aller chier quand vous voulez, chiez donc tout votre chien de saoul! Nous n'en sommes pas de même ici, où je suis obligée de garder mon étron pour le soir; il n'y a pas de frottoir aux maisons du côté de la forêt. J'ai le malheur d'en habiter une, et par conséquent le chagrin d'aller chier dehors, ce qui me fâche, parce que j'aime à chier à mon aise quand mon cul ne porte sur rien. Item, tout le monde nous voit chier; il y passe des hommes, des femmes, des filles, des garçons, des abbés et des Suisses ... Vous voyez par là que nul plaisir sans peine, et que si on ne chiait point, je serais à Fontainebleau comme le poisson dans l'eau."<sup>45</sup>

This extravagance of coprology is scarcely rendered by the anodine extract to be found in Elias:

"The smell of the mire is horrible ... Paris is a dreadful place. The streets smell so badly that you cannot go out. The extreme heat is causing large quantities of meat and dish to rot in them, and this, coupled to the multitude of people who (shit) in the street, produces a smell so detestable that it cannot be endured."<sup>46</sup>

We shall note later the subsequent development of 'shame thresholds' which regulate what can/cannot be said in various situations. It would appear, however, that before the 17th century (and again a little later in Germany than in France) there was relatively little differentiation regarding 'self-censorship' between the languages of the ruling class and of other people.

The initial moves to 'educate' a 'knightly' class (of which Erasmus's text is symptomatic) were concerned almost exclusively with a cultivation of shame based on "what others may think". The texts of the period were frequently addressed to children, though in practice they were more often used to begin to regulate adult behaviour, and incidentally to instil an attitude to the body which moved rapidly away from any notion of grotesque realism or the material bodily lower stratum. Though it would be wrong to see the process as overly mechanistic, it would seem that both the suppression of the grotesque body and the instructions (both in pedagogic and in legalist form) concerning what was to be considered distasteful were motivated by what was distasteful to the masters:

"They compel them, the social inferiors in their immediate surroundings, to control and restrain these functions in a way that they do not at first impose upon themselves."<sup>47</sup>  
(original emphasis)

Thus it is interesting to find Furnivall's observation<sup>48</sup> that nearly all English words denoting manners are of French origin (the language of royalty in the mediaeval period): courtesy, villainy, nurture, dignity, etiquette, debonnaire, gracious, polite, gentillesse, etc. compared with only three of Saxon origin (thew, churlish, wanton), all three significantly negative judgements of behaviour. The point about the ruling class not necessarily applying the same standards to their own behaviour is elaborated by Elias himself<sup>49</sup> and in another context by Dominique Laporte.

In November of 1539 Paris saw the enactment of the edict of Villers-Cotterêts, which announced new legal powers aimed at "cleaning"<sup>50</sup> the city; strict penalties involving loss of stock or property were to be enforced chiefly for offences of wilfully

depositing human or other excrement in the streets: excrement was henceforth to be kept in the house until night, then disposed of in prescribed ways. Provision was also to be made (enforceable by 'law') for places in which excretory functions could be exercised as discreetly as possible. There were over thirty articles in this edict, the majority of which need not concern us here. What is of interest is Laporte's comment that

"... les années qui suivirent furent marquées d'abord par la désobéissance du prince à l'égard de sa propre injonction, comme en témoigne l'architecture de nombreux châteaux et palais au XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles, dont ceux de Fontainebleau, Saint-Cloud et Versailles."<sup>51</sup>

As noted in the letter from the Duchess of Orléans (see above), by 1694 the required modifications had not yet been carried out at Fontainebleau. This should perhaps come as no surprise; as long before as 1372 and again in 1395 there had been ordinances in Paris forbidding the throwing of ordure from windows, and, John Bourke notes, in 1513 "privies were ordered for each house in Paris." In 1764, Versailles could be described thus:

"The unpleasant odours in the park, gardens, even the chateau, make one's gorge rise. The communicating passages, courtyards, buildings in the wings, corridors, are full of urine and feces ... the avenue Saint-Cloud is covered with stagnant water and dead cats."<sup>53</sup>

Indeed there is also ample evidence that as regards public places little changed over the next century or so. For example

"We civilized and refined people live amid an uncleanness that is a constant reminder of the infirmities to which nature has confined us ... Nothing is more shocking ... than our great buildings, edged with the residue of digestion."<sup>54</sup>

As we noted above, the gradual movement of the 'shame threshold' regarding bodily behaviour itself was accompanied over the period

between the 15th and the 18th centuries by a progressive change in what could be spoken or written about, though the relations between the two were always complex.

It should be stressed at this point that we are dealing with attitudes to bodily functions and property, not with any 'objective' evaluation of cleanliness/dirtiness. There is now considerable evidence indicating that the Middle Ages between the 10th and the 15th centuries were marked by a relatively high level of personal cleanliness (indeed most castles of the time were equipped with rudimentary toilet facilities which could be found lacking two or three centuries later during the Renaissance); this is, however, not incompatible with the grotesque-realist attitude to excrement described above. Roman toilets were frequently communal meeting-places, yet were clean. By contrast, the 19th century French ladies who did not wash their private parts too often because only prostitutes did that sort of thing no doubt considered themselves quite clean enough. 'Objectively' speaking, the Renaissance period (the 17th century in France) appears to have been a relatively 'dirty' time, and the developments of attitudes described below should be seen against this background. Indeed the conjunction of the shift away from the bodily grotesque, the move into an 'objectively' 'dirty' period, and the shift from communal to personal cleanliness will be seen to have been highly significant.

The non-correspondence between the presence of latrines/urinals and 'civilization' was also noted by John Bourke.<sup>55</sup> Not only could this be observed with the passage of time in Europe; many examples of the non-correspondence can also be noted by comparing mutually

contemporary cultures. Thus

"... the New Zealanders had privies to every 3 or 4 of their houses ... there were no privies in Madrid until 1760; the determination of the King to introduce them and sewers, and to prohibit the throwing of human ordure out of windows after nightfall, as had been the custom, nearly precipitated a revolution."<sup>56</sup>

Though texts such as those of Tannhauser and da Riva in the 13th century and of Erasmus in 1530 were certainly 'symptomatic' of social relations at the time, there is also a sense in which the frankness/explicitness of the language coexisted with a function of cultivating feelings of shame in the reader who did not conform to the described desirable norm. Actual behaviour in the areas of table etiquette, nose-blowing, shitting, urinating, and passing wind gradually underwent change over the period between the 15th and 18th centuries (the nature of these changes is the subject of Elias' book), but changes in attitudes as expressed in the literature are harder to pin down. the stigmatization of shit and other excrement and of other forms of dirt was very slow in developing, and coincided, as I shall argue below, with a certain phase in the development of capitalism.

The process from matter-of-fact advice such as

"Before you sit down, make sure your seat has not been fouled" (Brunswick Court Regulations, 1589).<sup>57</sup>

to the euphemisms of the 18th and 19th centuries was, then, a slow one. One example of a definite observable change is the difference between the 1729 and 1774 editions of LaSalle's 'Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne'. Although the 1729 edition already offers the advice that

"It is never proper to speak of parts of the body that should be hidden, nor of certain bodily necessities to which Nature has subjected us, nor even to mention them."<sup>58</sup>



there is nevertheless explicit detail of when or when not to emit wind etc. The 1774 edition is considerably condensed, omits the detail, and represents a relatively drastic shift in what can and can not be mentioned. It is clear, of course, that what seems from here like a fairly linear development in shame thresholds and social attitudes involves a lot of assumptions about the underlying causes. Even if (see below) it is feasible to see the changes between the 15th and 18th centuries in the light of a developing capitalist system, the problem will then remain of bridging the gap between the 18th century and Monty Python. I shall leave that particular bridge until I come to it, and comfort myself with

"The question remains whether the change in behaviour, in the social process of the 'civilization' of man, can be understood, at least in isolated phases and in its elementary features, with any degree of precision."<sup>59</sup>

What was/(is) the motor of these changes in attitudes to the natural functions? For Elias,

"'rational understanding' is not the motor of the 'civilizing' of eating or of other behaviour."<sup>60</sup>

For Elias, and for me, the motor of the changes is social, political, and, in a last instance, economic. If we take the instance of meat-eating as an example, it is first of all evident that in the secular upper class the mediaeval period saw the consumption of large quantities of meat (up to and over two pounds per day per person)<sup>61</sup>; relatively little meat was consumed by everyone else, for crudely economic reasons. The manner of serving the meat, however, would not have been so different when and where the 'lower classes', the peasants, would have had the opportunity to eat meat. The animal would generally have been cooked whole and large parts of it brought

to the table (note in passing that again this would now strike us as exaggerated, even as grotesque: grotesque realism again). Between the 17th and 19th centuries the serving of meat at table changed drastically, large joints of meat being progressively replaced by smaller and smaller cuts and individual portions.

Three factors were arguably primary in this evolution: first, the division of labour, by which more and more of the household production and processing activities such as weaving, spinning, slaughtering, carpentry etc. were transferred to specialists so that the family became little more than a consumer unit; second, the concomitant tendency towards smaller family units; and third, the alienation inherent in the developing capitalist social formation which tended to produce atomized individuals for whom consumption was primarily an individualist activity and carnivalesque excess was an unthinkable profligacy.

A second instance of change nearer to the bowels of this research was that in social attitudes to shit/excrement. The 1539 edict referred to above was the symptom of coming change but was not in itself very effective. We have seen above that in grotesque realism shit and other excrement had a positive/regenerative value: thus whilst this does not mean that people enjoyed wallowing in the stuff, the 'stercus homini' was nevertheless relatively free of the vilification with which it has been repressed in our more recent cultures.

The effect of the 1539 edict was a tendency for human waste to become domesticated, kept at home until it could be disposed of:

"Si l'odeur de l'excrémentiel se supporte, en famille, là où le lien social est le plus resserré, il y fallait certainement la condition d'une privatisation du déchet dont tous les âges n'offrent pas l'exemple."<sup>62</sup>

"Cut into the flow of milk here, it's your brother's turn, don't take a crap here, cut into the stream of shit over there. Retention is the primary function of the family: it is a matter of learning what elements of desiring-production the family is going to reject, what it is going to retain."<sup>63</sup>

This must, even in the short term, have had far-reaching consequences in the area of social relations: on the one hand kinds of intimacy and individuality became possible (and necessary!) which had not previously been conceived of, and on the other hand there was the (added) obstacle to entering the other's house: the fear of embarrassment or unpleasantness caused by a forced encounter with this individualized excrement. Thus

"... the privatisation of human waste was only one aspect of a larger trend, the rise of the concept of the individual ... this concept played an important role in the rise of intolerance ...".<sup>64</sup>

"Other people's odour became a decisive criterion".<sup>65</sup>

In writing of the changes in the body of 'man' in the progress from the despotic to the capitalist, Deleuze and Guattari note that the citizen's organs

"... will become those of private man, they will become privatized after the model and memory of the disgraced anus, ejected from the social field - the obsessive fear of smelling bad".<sup>66</sup>

Privatization is on the way, and

"The family has become the locus of retention and resonance of all the social determinations ... wherever one turns, one no longer finds anything but father-mother - this Oedipal filth that sticks to your skin."<sup>67</sup>

There was, indeed, a 1563 amendment to the edict, which placed a statutory requirement upon every householder in Paris to sweep the

road around (his) house and to make a pile of the ordure in front of the house, to be collected at an appointed hour by a designated cart.<sup>68</sup> Laporte's commentary is interesting:

"Que chacun soit tenu de 'nettoyer devant sa maison' pourrait en effet ne pas être considéré comme négligeable pour la place que cela occupe dans le procès au cours d'une individualisation des pratiques sociales, d'une réduction et d'un resserrement des liens de contiguïté à l'espace familial."<sup>69</sup>

"Ce petit tas de merde que j'amasse là, devant ma porte, il est à moi et nul n'en pourra médire si ce tas est bien formé."<sup>70</sup>

"C'est moi que ça regarde: la politique du déchet vient imprimer dans le rapport du sujet à son corps quelque chose qui n'anticipe peut-être pas médiocrement sur l'idéologie cartésienne du moi."<sup>71</sup>

Whatever the motives for the 1539 and 1563 edicts (the close relation between language, power and shit will be discussed later), the consequences for the relation of the individual to the body and to the family must have been far-reaching. We have, in fact, the rudiments of the process by which the shame thresholds were advanced and new forms of social behaviour internalized, with the individual now definitively split off from the surrounding cosmos.

"The chief modelling processes, as Elias shows, were the development of a capacity for self-distancing - that is, a psychic splitting of individuals from their affects - and a consequent advancing of the thresholds of shame and embarrassment, of the "limits of filthiness". This produced the bodily splitting of an individual into inner and outer physical realms, with the skin forming an increasingly sharp borderline."<sup>72</sup> (original emphasis)

Theweleit later describes how

"(the god within) was replaced in turn by a 'god without' who dwelt on the skin and whose name was Cleanliness."

It will not be possible in these pages to go in any detail into parallel developments in Britain. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that in England privies appeared during the reign of Elizabeth I

(1558-1603). John Bourke, in referring to Sir John Harington's 'Metamorphosis of Ajax', declares that

"... from the description of the latrine in question there is no doubt that Harington anticipated nearly all the mechanisms of modern days."<sup>74</sup>

It is also a commonplace that the streets in Britain's cities continued to be filthy through the 18th and 19th centuries. In the second half of the latter century, it appears that in London

"... refuse was left in the streets. Powers to set up ... public baths, washhouses and street-sweepers were ignored by 'vested interests in filth and dirt'."<sup>75</sup>

The two instances relating to meat-eating and to shit should be sufficient to illustrate a point succinctly made by Norbert Elias:

"It will be seen again and again how characteristic of the whole process that we call civilization is this movement of segregation, this hiding 'behind the scenes' of what has become distasteful."<sup>76</sup>

How well this also corresponds to the 'concealment' of the production process in capitalism. The traces of labour are effaced so that the product can fetch maximum profit and so that the consumer is not reminded of the origins of the commodity, and the traces of ideological work are effaced in the unconscious nature of the imaginary relation with the conditions of existence. Nor is this parallel of effacements only stylistic. In the case of the masking of the labour lying behind a commodity it is a question of safeguarding financial investment; in the case of the unconscious functioning of ideology it is ultimately a matter of libidinal economy. The point is made that the relation is, indeed, more than a parallelism, by Deleuze and Guattari:

"Not that a simple parallelism should be drawn between capitalist social production and desiring-production, or between the flows of money-capital and the shit-flows of desire. The

relationship is much closer: desiring-machines are in social machines and nowhere else."<sup>77</sup>

The unconscious is as material as society. We shall deal with Deleuze and Guattari's notions of libidinal economy and desire at greater length in a later section.

The shifts in attitudes to meat and to excrement correspond to stages in the 'consumerisation' of these areas of human experience; if it is true that

"In many of our meat dishes the animal form is so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that while eating one is scarcely reminded of its origin."<sup>78</sup>

then it is worth asking who owns the means of production by which the animal is slaughtered, by which the meat is cut, by which it is processed, packaged, transported etc.

Entirely in keeping with this development was a shift from first a "what others will think" sanction then a spiritual or religious sanction involving some notion of what was the 'right' thing to do in a particular situation, to hygienist explanations of why it was better to wash hands before a meal, why it was bad to retain urine etc. The relativity of hygienist rationales is illustrated by the fact that where, occasionally, earlier precepts did employ some such rationale, medical opinion was claimed to favour the freedom of natural functions<sup>79</sup> (Erasmus writes that "to hold back urine is harmful to health" and refers to "the illness-bearing power of the retained fart"). Medical opinion since the 18th century has more often come to be mobilized rather to support the repression of natural functions ("Spitting ... is very bad for the health" from 'The Habits of Good Society' 1859.<sup>80</sup>) In any case, the point is

that even where hygienist arguments are demonstrably sound,<sup>81</sup> their function is not primarily philanthropic:

"These hygienic reasons then play an important role in adult ideas on civilization, usually without their relation to the arsenal of childhood conditioning being realized. It is only from such a realization, however, that what is rational in them can be distinguished from what is only seemingly rational, i.e. founded primarily on the disgust and shame feelings of adults."<sup>82</sup>

"The social reference of shame and embarrassment recedes more and more from consciousness. Precisely because the social command not to show oneself exposed or performing natural functions now operates with regard to everyone and is imprinted in this form on the child, it seems to the adult a command of this own inner self and takes on the form of more of less total and automatic self-restraint."<sup>83</sup>

One further passage by Elias can stand as a summary of this section.

"In the subsequent stage, renunciation and restraint of impulses is compelled far less by particular persons; expressed provisionally and approximately, it is now, more directly than before, the less visible and more impersonal compulsions of social interdependence, the division of labour, the market, and competition that impose restraint and control on the impulses and emotions. It is these pressures, and the corresponding manner of explanation and conditioning, which make it appear that socially desirable behaviour is voluntarily produced by the individual himself, on his own initiative. This applied the regulation and restraint of drives necessary for 'work'; it also applies to the whole pattern according to which drives are modelled in bourgeois industrial societies."<sup>84</sup>

The internalisation of hygienist principles in particular is in line with a point made by Richard Dyer (cf. pg.13 above) that one of the ways in which the dependency of capitalism (and its stress on the individual) on bodily labour is occluded is through

"... the professionalism of medicine and the medicalisation of ever increasing aspects of bodily function."<sup>85</sup>

The generality of this whole educative process has the ideological effect of confirming the impression that people are equal, that we're really all the same, and, crucially, that we all choose to conform, that we are all free agents, that ideology does not exist.

There are of course those who do not learn (or deliberately reject) the rules, who are then classed as sick, insane, eccentric etc. ... or as childish, though in fact 'our' society is massively different from the mediaeval in that 'our' children are generally expected at an early age to attain a far lower shame threshold than even adults were expected to achieve four or five hundred years ago. In Philippe Ariès' words,

"... le respect dû aux enfants était, pour lors (XVI siècle), chose tout à fait ignorée. Devant eux on se permettait tout: paroles crues, actions et situations scabreuses; ils avaient tout entendu, tout vu ... attouchements dont on imagine aisément ce qu'en dirait un psychanalyste moderne ... Ce psychanalyste aurait tort."<sup>86</sup>

The pythonesque preoccupation with the grotesque, with bodily secretions and social taboos, can thus conventionally be seen as "sick", "abnormal", ... or "childish". Or, of course, be recuperated as English eccentricity which can then be traded off against that great British virtue, tolerance. In this respect it remains to be seen what function the Pythons' 'rule-breaking' has in practice.

### 1.3 Is grotesque realism dead?

Are there some residual aspects of the mediaeval attitudes to the excremental which have survived into our culture? Apart from developments such as the 'realist grotesque' referred to above, are there other residual elements of grotesque realism to be found in modern popular culture?

Bakhtin has identified some ways in which the 'lower material bodily principle' lives on in contemporary language:

"The body that figures in all the expressions of the unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is



fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying."<sup>87</sup>

He asserts that

"In all languages there is a great number of expressions related to the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly, the mouth and the nose."<sup>88</sup>

It certainly does appear that there is not such a rich vocabulary relating to the arms, the eyes, the face, to those parts of the body least important to the grotesque sensibility.

Pierre Bourdieu has also identified the residues of a more 'organic' oral pleasure in the popular vision:

"Appliquant la même 'intention' au lieu de l'ingestion alimentaire et au lieu de l'émission du discours, la vision populaire, qui appréhende bien l'unité de l'habitus et de l'hexis corporelle, associe aussi à la gueule la franche acceptation et la franche manifestation des plaisirs élémentaires."<sup>89</sup>

To anticipate a discussion in a later section, Bourdieu also recognizes the 'subversive' potential of the lower material bodily stratum in the sexually explicit mode of 'unofficial' speech; this

"franc-parler dont les audaces sont moins innocentes qu'il ne paraît puisque, en rabaissant l'humanité à la commune nature, ventre, cul et sexe, tripes, bouffe et merde, il tend à mettre le monde social cul par-dessus tête."<sup>90</sup>

This kind of language, abundant in excremental and genital references, would correspond to a celebratory mood in keeping with grotesque realism.

At other points in his analysis Bakhtin tempers his euphoric valorisation of the 'unofficial' language with a more pessimistic view:

"... modern indecent abuse and cursing have retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body ... These expressions ... are fragments of an alien language in which certain things could be said in the past

but which at present conveys nothing but senseless abuse."<sup>91</sup>  
In this case the regenerative/positive aspects of the grotesque body would have been lost.

Whilst the celebratory mode and the aggressive/alienated abusive mode would seem to coexist in our culture, I feel that Bakhtin has a tendency on the whole to undervalue 'official' language and its power.

This ambivalence is caught by Eagleton.

"The laughter of carnival is both plebeian derision and plebeian solidarity, an empty semiotic flow which in decomposing significance nevertheless courses with the impulse of comradeship."<sup>92</sup>

The fact that Eagleton's "comradeship" is probably different from the cosmic undifferentiation of (Bakhtin's) mediaeval grotesque compounds the ambivalence.

It doesn't take a law or an edict to make/keep a language clean (yes, there was another edict in 1539, one concerned with cleansing the official French language of Latin and other impurities):

"La langue parle ainsi:  
'Pourquoi suis-je si belle?  
Parce que mon maître me lave.'"<sup>93</sup>

Indeed the effectiveness of such laws/edict is disputable:

"... les 'moeurs linguistiques' ne se laissent pas modifier par décrets comme le croient souvent les partisans d'une politique volontariste de 'défence de la langue'."<sup>94</sup>

Rather is it a complex set of 'Ideological State Apparata' (ISA's),<sup>95</sup> particularly the educational, cultural and family ISA's which confirm, in a way which bypasses consciousness, a 'legitimate' language.

In relation to the excremental, it is arguable that in our culture a relaxation of taboos is taking place. According to Elias,<sup>96</sup> this would be due to the institutionalisation and the internalisation of 'standard practices' relating to excretory functions, and the development of a technology which allows the concealment of the process to be taken for granted. The relaxation can then take place in the context of an already established secure standard. The Monty Python films can no doubt be seen as (one of many other) symptoms of this relaxation.

What relation such a relaxation has to deep-seated attitudes to anality is another matter. For Norman O. Brown,

"Technological progress makes increased sublimation possible ... it follows that what we call historical progress, or higher civilization, means an increase in the domain of the death instinct at the expense of the life instinct."<sup>97</sup>

Since

"Sublimation is the mortification of the body and a sequestration of the life of the body into dead things."<sup>98</sup>

presumably even Brown would agree that this would not be a good thing.

The concept of sublimation is a cue for the next subsection.

#### 1.4 Psychoanalysis and the excremental

"Il y a une nécessité culturelle du refoulement pour arriver au langage."<sup>99</sup>

In this section I shall try to deal with some of the psychoanalytic determinants of contemporary (and to some extent past) attitudes to the excremental. Though questions of power and language

are closely linked to this, I shall try to avoid them until the following subsection.

It is important to try to go beyond the traditional Freudian notion of the anal phase which precedes a genital phase. Whilst these 'phases' do exist (at least heuristically) the more important thing is to recognize in what ways the anal always returns, never actually goes away, and what the precise mechanisms are by which psychological attitudes to the excremental are instituted. It is crucial to avoid the mistake of

"... conceiving the Oedipus complex to be an inescapable structural necessity of the process of socialisation (insertion into the symbolic order), rather than seeing it as a historically determined variant of that process."<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless a summary of the contemporary significance of anality is in order.

Françoise Dolto adduces empirical evidence to argue the primacy of a sense of smell in new-born babies. She has found that babies will often refuse to feed in the absence of the mother's<sup>101</sup> smell, and that, conversely, a baby will feed in the mother's absence if her smell is present (e.g. an article of clothing). She has found that if the mother's smell is removed entirely then this can lead to an entire loss of the sense of smell which in some cases can be restored through psychoanalysis.

The smell of the infant's own shit then comes to mediate in the olfactory relation to the mother; filling the nappy becomes a means of expressing desire for the mother:

"Mais quand sa mère n'est pas là et quand il en a besoin, qu'il désire une communication inter-psychique, en faisant

dans ses langes il y a l'odeur qui est comme un appel de lui à maman, grâce à cette zone médiatrice de leur relation."<sup>102</sup>

- thus while the infant is not yet able to communicate orally (has not yet begun to enter the Symbolic), he/she communicates anally, by producing a smell which will attract mother's attention; in a secure relationship with the mother the warmth of a full nappy is comforting in its promise of imminent attention. At this stage shit has a reassuring function and is not (usually) the source of any anxiety; in Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary, the partial objects with which the child is surrounded, mother, shit, urine, milk, nappy, toys etc. are at the service of so many desiring-machines and have not yet become attached to a particular socius. This non-differentiation is noted also by Melanie Klein (cf. pg.10 above).

It is with the capacity for independent bodily movements that the problems start.

"Lorsque l'enfant arrive à une motricité qui le rend capable de porter les mains vers ce qu'il désire et d'imiter la maman, la maman qui prend les excréments, elle l'en empêche. Or jusque là il pensait avec sa logique orale qu'elle les mangeait ou les manipulait pour le plaisir, comme lui ses joujoux."<sup>103</sup>

The problem of the anal stage (for the infant) is to "understand" that the mother can handle the shit, but that he/she (the infant) is not allowed to do so:

"C'est comme si maman disait: 'Non! tu n'as pas le droit d'y toucher. J'avais, j'ai le droit d'y toucher mais toi non.' La maman s'angoisse parce que c'est dégoûtant, et qu'elle a peur qu'il s'infecte. (Ces idées de maman!). Pipi, caca, poison."<sup>104</sup>

The problem poses itself for the infant as having to throw away this part of oneself without having felt/smelt/tasted it, and since in the infant's awareness this is what the mother-figure must do when she takes the shit away, the message is "Il t'est interdit de

devenir adulte".<sup>105</sup> Moreover there is the perplexing disparity between the infant's experience and the mother's instruction:

"Alors que ça sent bon, maman déclare que ça sent mauvais."<sup>106</sup>

which is a problematisation of the identification with the mother; the latter can then only be maintained if the anxiety about the shit is repressed and it is agreed that "Mummy knows best":

"Il lui faut introjecter un langage et une éthique qui dénie valeur à quelque chose de son être vivant qui jusque-là était narcissisant. Je pense que pour tout bébé ce 'mensonge' qui va le rendre adapté à la vie humaine est ressenti comme une aliénation à sa vérité pour accepter une vérité qu'il lui faut découvrir afin de continuer sa promotion vers l'indentification aux adultes."<sup>107</sup>

"L'Enfant découvre que ses parents sont hypocrites et injustes, qu'il y a deux poids et deux mesures: les grands et les petits n'ont pas les mêmes droits. Il faut donc parvenir à être grand et fort afin de pouvoir prendre sa revanche, afin de faire toutes les choses défendues, de se permettre enfin de les interdire à plus petit que soi: on peut alors dominer et reprimer ses propres enfants."<sup>108</sup>

The use of the work "propre" here is not simply coincidental.

"... 'anal cleanliness' (is) the formation in the child of the small responsible person; and there is a relation between 'private cleanliness' and 'private ownership' (proprete privée, propriete privée) which is not merely an association of words but something inevitable."<sup>109</sup>

The role of sublimation and of anality in the privateness of property will be discussed below. The real point, however, is that

"... property remains excremental, and is known to be excremental in our secret heart, the unconscious."<sup>110</sup>

This repression can rarely be effected without the appearance of some symptoms of resistance (often hiding 'precious objects' behind radiators, in boxes, under floorboards), and Freudian orthodoxy has it that most if not all 'adult' collecting activities, including most hobbies such as stamp-collecting, trainspotting, money-saving, even collecting knowledge (reading?) are an unconscious working out

of unassimilated sexual taboos through sublimation and displacement. This means of dealing with repressed anal anxieties can be seen as a more or less inevitable consequence of socialisation in our kind of (capitalist) social formation.

Collecting can be seen as a symptom of anal anxiety. As Theweleit points out this, however, is by no means the whole story ...

"So-called toilet-training turns out then, to be a process of drying up the child and instilling guilt feelings. Traditional psychoanalysis wrongly limits the consequences of that process to the creation of the 'anal' type, the character with a compulsion for order: the pedant, the collector, the happy statistician, the bureaucrat, or the inspired positivist. 'Toilet training' must have broader consequence than that. With its compulsion for mopping up, it emerges as the primary force for implementing sexual repression in the widest sense and, in combination with the installations of adult guilt feelings in children's bodies, as the essential process for producing sexual anxiety."<sup>111</sup>

with profound effects on the way in which we inhabit the world and our bodies. Whilst

"... archaic man characteristically has a massive structure of excremental magic, which indicates the degree to which his anality remains unsublimated ..."<sup>112</sup>

the 'symptoms' of anality in the Western capitalist world are typically characterised by the absence of excrement, and, for Norman O. Brown, ultimately by the absence of any link with the living body.

"... the morbid attempt to get away from the body can only result in a morbid fascination ... in the death of the body."<sup>113</sup>

To rise above the body is then to equate the body itself with excrement. The sublimatory movement out of the body is also, and more controversially, for Brown intimately tied to the development of the psychic structures which anticipated capitalism:

"The drive to sublimate is the same as the desire to produce an economic surplus."<sup>114</sup>

He is certainly not entirely wrong to suggest the close link. He notes that Aristotle had already identified money-making as "an unnatural perversion";<sup>115</sup> that

"the prudential calculating character (the ideal type of Homo Economicus) is an anal character."<sup>116</sup>

is, since Freud, part of psychoanalytic orthodoxy. In Freudian theory, there is indeed no room for an excessively prudential (anal) character.

"Prudential calculation as such is an anal trait; the theory of the anal character is a theory of what Max Weber called the capitalist spirit, and not just a deviant exaggeration such as the miser."<sup>117</sup> (original emphasis)

It comes as no surprise that for Freudian psychoanalysis the desire for or accumulation of knowledge itself has its roots in repressed anality, expressing as it does an extension of "the possessive instinct." This idea is taken further by Ferenczi:

"Thinking is after all only a means of preventing a squandering through action, so that thinking is only a special expression of the tendency to economize and as such has its origins in anal-eroticism."<sup>118</sup> (original emphasis)

A reminder that the anal-erotic complex, and, indeed, the tendency to economize, are not transcultural absolutes but are intimately linked to an Oedipal unconsciousness, comes from Deleuze and Guattari:

"If it is true that thought can be evaluated in terms of the degree of oedipalisation, then yes, whites think too much."<sup>119</sup>

Whether the product of the sublimation be money, a big collection of matchboxes, or knowledge, that product is accorded as much value as is denied to the repressed shit.

"Thus it is that what belongs to the lowest depths in the minds of each one of us is changed, through this formation of the ideal, into what we value highest."<sup>120</sup>



"In fact sublimation is exercised on the anus as on no other organ, in the sense that the anus is made to progress from the lowest to the highest point: anality is the very movement of sublimation itself."<sup>121</sup>

This centrality of the anus to the very existence of sublimation is also echoed by Deleuze and Guattari.

"It is the anus itself that ascends on high, under the conditions ... of its removal from the field, conditions that do not presuppose sublimation, since on the contrary sublimation results from them. It is not the anal that presents itself for sublimation, it is sublimation in its entirety that is anal ... The whole of Oedipus is anal and implies an individual overinvestment of the organ to compensate for its collective disinvestment."<sup>122</sup>

The lowly (?) status of the anus brings us back to the relegation of shit to bad object. Nevertheless it has been remarked in a number of contexts that the smell of one's own excrement is generally tolerable if not indeed positively enjoyable; it is the smell of others' excrement which is unpleasant.<sup>123</sup> Indeed there are cases of 'anosmic' disorders in which sense of smell has been partly or completely lost; this corresponds to a troubled repression based on insecurity in regard to the mother-figure in early infancy. It is interesting to note in this context Kant's remark that that which is beautiful has no smell. In reference to this, Laporte's observation that "ce qui sent trouble la vue"<sup>124</sup> underlines the almost total displacement of the olfactory by the visual sense in our culture. In its repression of the more fundamental drives this subjugation is also profoundly educative.

"L'Odeur devient l'innommable et le beau ce qui se fonde de l'élimination de l'odeur, concomitante du procès d'individuation du déchet, de son instauration dans la sphère du privé."<sup>125</sup>

Another sense in which the origins of the sense of smell need to be repressed is to do with the semiological status of smells:

"L'odeur résiste à la mise en scène. Obstinément, elle continue de pencher du côté de l'indice ..."<sup>126</sup>

To use a relatively crude linguistic model, what is the 'signifier' of a smell? After all, "... our language is of no use when it comes to describing the smellable world ...".<sup>127</sup> It is in keeping with the pre-signifying phase of the infant's development that the sense of smell should be so unavailable to language; for smell to become a sign would risk the invasion of consciousness by the repressed origins with their embarrassing baggage of frustrated anality.

Laporte (as so often) puts it provocatively:

"Car toute odeur, primitivement, est une odeur de merde."<sup>128</sup>

Brown cites Freud in referring to

"... the coprophilic instinctual components, which have proved incompatible with our aesthetic standards of culture, probably since, as a result of our adopting an erect gait, we raised our organs of smell from the ground."<sup>129</sup>

Though I hope to indicate some of the ways in which attitudes to anality have been/are indirectly products of socioeconomic change, the above observation may indeed constitute some kind of baseline.

Brown also seems to accept this.

"The whole of sexuality and not merely anal erotism is threatened with falling a victim to the organic repression consequent upon man's adoption of the erect posture and the lowering of the value of the sense of smell."<sup>130</sup>

One objection often made to psychoanalytic models is their remoteness from ready experience, their seeming inaccessibility. Unfortunately this is a feature of the discipline which has simple to be either accepted or refused in a context such as this in which

more detailed work on the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis is not practicable.

A second objection, one which is worth more extended discussion, is that much psychoanalytic theory is ahistorical, absolutist, and appears, at least, to posit processes and psychic structures (such as the mirror phase and the Oedipus complex) as if they were unchanging, "eternal".<sup>131</sup> There has certainly been this tendency, but one can identify a number of attempts to situate psychoanalytic notions historically.

The problem is posed by Norbert Elias:

"It may be that there have always been 'neuroses'. But the 'neuroses' we see about us today are a specific historical form of psychic conflict which needs psychogenetic and sociogenetic elucidation."<sup>132</sup>

and by Dominique Laporte:

"Les objets que la doctrine freudienne isole et experimente comme fondamentaux, il faut aller les reconnaître à l'oeuvre dans l'histoire."<sup>133</sup>

Within his assumption of the primacy of the anal instance, Brown makes much the same point:

"The anal character of civilization is a topic which requires sociological and historical as well as psychological treatment."<sup>134</sup>

Clearly, also, there is no question of a straightforward linear development (towards repression); it is necessary to consider the particular social/economic determinants in a particular conjuncture to understand why particular psychological/psychoanalytic notions come to be favoured.

When, however, Brown notes that

"for Erich Fromm, economic structures cause the changes in character structure; that is to say, capitalism generates the capitalist spirit"<sup>135</sup>

he does not really endorse Fromm's view, but tends to put the terms the other way round and to deal in a kind of essentialism. His commentary on the psychic geography of Protestantism, capitalism and many aspects of civilization in general is fascinating and insightful, but his invocation of notions such as "there is something in the human psyche which commits man to non-enjoyment, to work ..." <sup>136</sup> weaken his position somewhat. At least he recognizes the temporal mutability of repressive mechanisms:

"What the temporal relativity of time concepts really signifies, and it is a hopeful sign, is that the structure of basic repression is not immutable. What Mircea Eliade really discovered is a significant difference in the structure of repression between archaic and modern man."<sup>137</sup>

The piece by Mia Campioni and Liz Gross (footnote 100) is an exemplary resituation of the Freudian and Lacanian projects, with particular care paid to distinguishing between natural/biological and social/ideological factors. It is partly an (itself ideologically overdetermined) confusion of these factors which allows the psychoanalytic orthodoxy to be

"... committed to the assumption of pre-given desires and objects of desire, emanating naturally from the human organism. In other words, they postulate as individual, objects and desires which, we maintain, can only be seen as the effects of quite specific relations of power."<sup>138</sup>

Contrary to this, and sensibly enough, Campioni and Gross

"... see the Oedipus complex as the precondition for the stratification of subjects by class and power relations in bourgeois society."<sup>139</sup>

The way in which this stratification occurs is an important part of their project. Particular attention is paid to the constitution of the phallus as privileged signifier; its primacy is due to the

infant's interiorisation of clues given (mostly) by the parents, who already find themselves in a patriarchal social formation in which the phallus rules.

"By emphasizing the castration fears, at the same time it is affirmed that there is something to be afraid of, the power of the role of Symbolic father. Thus it is not accidental that the systematic playing-down of the childbirth fears and the systematic relegation of the role of the mother to the passive one is effected. The playing down of one half of the fear is a means whereby patriarchal values are transmitted."<sup>140</sup> (original emphasis)

Campioni and Gross point out Freud's (unconscious) complicity in laying the foundations of a potentially ahistorical, socially manipulative discipline.

"Freud cannot acknowledge that what we are witnessing is not a natural process at all, but is an example par excellence of the active imposition of the Oedipal network by the psychoanalytic institution, as embodied by Freud, the father and the mother."<sup>141</sup> (original emphasis)

The place of psychoanalytic explanation is rather thus defined:

"... what we want to show is the relationship of the Oedipal process to infantile socialisation in a society that demands uniquely individual and sexually differentiated subjects."<sup>142</sup>

so that Oedipal configurations are far from ubiquitous, far from necessary. Indeed

"It was Geza Roheim who said in all seriousness that the Oedipus complex was not to be found if it wasn't looked for."<sup>143</sup>

Oedipal configurations are the necessary corollary of a certain type of social formation:

"... all that can really be said is that given the way the infant's sexuality must be channelled in our society (i.e. the terms of power and sex), the Oedipus complex is probably the necessary outcome, but certainly not the natural one."<sup>144</sup>

"The process of oedipalisation is necessary for inscription into the class ideology of patriarchy and ensures that the polymorphous impulses of the child are channelled into the alternatives of masculinity and femininity, and that these

limits institute a difference of power and status between the 'opposite' sexes."<sup>145</sup>

Nor are conscious attempts to oppose/overturn conventional sexual practices bound to succeed:

"... la révolution sexuelle comme rédemption du corps total par le seul exercice des organes génitaux est une aberration, une imbécilité aussi monstrueuse que le puritanisme hypocrite des générations antérieures ..."<sup>146</sup>

"tout se passe comme si (Reich nous disait): au moins ça ne sortira pas du petit carré génital, de la petite touffe des poils pubiens (analogue en cela à Freud qui enferme l'inconscient dans la famille d'Oedipe)."<sup>147</sup>

This is echoed by Deleuze and Guattari, for whom

"There is a hypothesis dear to Freud: the libido does not invest the social field as such except on condition that it be desexualized and sublimated. If he holds so closely to this hypothesis, it is because he wants above all to keep sexuality in the limited framework of Narcissus and Oedipus, the ego and the family."<sup>148</sup>

By contrast, they assert that

"the relation to the nonfamilial is always primary: in the form of sexuality of the field in social production, and the nonhuman sex in desiring-production."<sup>149</sup>

Taking up the kind of critique exemplified by Bruckner and Finkielkraut,

"we admit that any comparison of sexuality with cosmic phenomena such as 'electrical storms', 'the blue of the orgone', 'St. Elmo's fire and the bluish formations of sunspot activity', fluids and flows, matter and particles, in the end appear to us more adequate than the reduction of sexuality to the pitiful little familialist secret."<sup>150</sup>

To return to Campioni and Gross; their piece is primarily concerned with an elucidation of ways in which Freud's analysis of the 'Little Hans' case itself represents a contribution to the redistribution of "omnidirectional" impulses in the infant into a stereotypical masculine sexuality. Much of this need not concern us here, but one account of the way the parents (and other figures,

such as Dr. Freud!) are crucial in "transcribing" unconscious adult values into the infant's (un)consciousness has a breadth which also encompasses the excremental.

"This transcription has two phases as well as a necessary a priori material base in the structural constraints of family relations. Firstly, one which contains sexual messages from the unconscious of the parents (and Freud) which are highly contradictory (because they are the effects of an adult unconscious and censorship). This is the phase that creates anxiety in Hans. Secondly, we get the transcription of the anxiety into sexual wishes experienced as emanating from the child. The result is 1) the inculcation of guilt, and 2) the absolution of guilt through adopting the parents' concept of Hans. The boy is 'cured' or subdued, i.e. successfully inserted into the social order."<sup>151</sup> (original emphasis)

This account is, among other things, a good description of the 'socialisation' of anality outlined above. The Campioni and Gross analysis of the 'Little Hans' case is a little thin on anality; the main reference is to the linking of excretory functions with childbirth:

"On April 24th my wife and I enlightened Hans up to a certain point: we told him that children grow inside their mummy and are then brought into the world by being pressed out of her like a 'lumpf' and that this involves a great deal of pain."<sup>152</sup>

In Hans' mind childbirth thus becomes associated with shitting, and, in Campioni and Gross's words, "(passed) on to childbirth a disgusting property".<sup>153</sup> This presupposes, of course, that our Hans had been effectively toilet-trained and had learned that "Pipi, caca, poison."

A related series of points bearing more particularly on the Oedipal is made by Deleuze and Guattari. The Oedipal is real enough, and

"we do not deny that there is an Oedipal sexuality, Oedipal heterosexuality and homosexuality, an Oedipal castration, as

well as complete objects, global images and specific egos.  
We deny that these are productions of the unconscious."<sup>154</sup>

For Deleuze and Guattari, the unconscious in its pristine state has nothing to do with Oedipus.

"The question, rather, is that of the absolutely anoedipal nature of the production of desire."<sup>155</sup> (original emphasis)

Rather is it a case of a (social) repression of the desiring-machines of the unconscious, and of the emergence of an oedipal structure as a displaced locus of repression:

"Such is the nature of Oedipus - the sham image. Repression does not operate through Oedipus, nor is it directed at Oedipus. It is not a question of the return of the repressed. Oedipus is a factitious product of psychic repression. Repression cannot act without displacing desire, without giving rise to a consequent desire, all ready, all warm for punishment, and without putting this desire in the place of the antecedent desire on which repression comes to bear in principle or in reality."<sup>156</sup> (original emphasis)

"For Oedipus to be occupied, it is not enough that it be a limit or a displaced represented in the system of representation; it must migrate to the heart of this system and itself come to occupy the position of the representative of desire. These conditions, inseparable from the paralogisms of the unconscious, are realized in the capitalist formation."<sup>157</sup>

This notion has its place here, allied as it is to the Campioni and Gross material. Its full significance, however, will be more evident later, especially when we come to look at models of pleasure/desire in Section 2 below.

This material should enable us to gain some fresh insights into the specificities of attitudes to the excremental, though clearly the further back in time one goes, the more speculation is involved. Nevertheless,

"Quand on lit des ouvrages sur le Moyen Age, on voit la manière dont les gens étaient beaucoup plus libres dans leurs pulsions anales. C'est parce qu'il n'y avait pas de condamnation du tout."<sup>158</sup>



I have touched on some of the development in excremental attitudes in a previous subsection, but one further determinant (itself the product of other more economic determinants) was the development of nappies for babies. Referring to adult attitudes to excrement, Françoise Dolto remarks:

"C'est quelque chose de nouveau dans notre civilisation. Avant le 'lavage à l'anglaise' les enfants étaient lavés bébés, mais dès qu'ils marchaient ils n'avaient pas de langes et très souvent d'ailleurs ils avaient le cul nu. Ils étaient sur le bras de la mère ou d'une grand-mère en permanence. Quand ils avaient besoin de déféquer ou de pisser, on les nettoyait tout de suite, il y avait beaucoup de monde autour des enfants. Dès qu'ils étaient en âge de marcher, ils avaient des cottes et ils faisaient où ça se trouvait, on balayait, ce n'était pas quelque chose dont la mère avait l'air d'être ni friande, ni horrifiée. Le sol était de terre battue."<sup>159</sup>

Thus until comparatively recently little fuss was made when small infants shat or urinated on the floor, because other conditions (numbers of people present who could help, nature of the floor, nature of the cleaning process) made it an event of little significance.

"La propreté est venue seulement avec le 'lavage à l'anglaise' au temps de la reine Victoria en 1900. Il n'y avait pas cette contradiction éthique tout d'un coup donnée à l'enfant: tu n'as pas le droit de devenir adulte sur ce plan."<sup>160</sup>

For Dolto too, then, the development of unconsciously internalized excremental taboos is linked to specific factors (economic determinants in disguise),<sup>161</sup> though as may have been seen above for her there are important biological/natural "constants" such as the primacy of the sense of smell.<sup>162</sup> The gradual masking of this privacy over the 18th and 19th centuries is well charted by Alain Corbin; according to him, by 1908 the decline in the role of olfaction was feared by some to indicate the "degeneracy of civilization."

"But Berillon was also very conscious that a return to a large-scale use of the sense of smell might signify regression; we thus see yet again the narrow dividing line."<sup>163</sup>

Though the proscriptions relating to smell are more subtle, others are not:

"C'est tout à fait refoulé et pourtant combien voyons-nous de mères horrifiées que l'enfant touche seulement à la pâte à modeler. Le toucher d'une matière molle à former, c'est comme si c'était interdit."<sup>164</sup>

Thus any brown/sticky/paste-like matter also rekindles anxiety in the modern adult psyche, indeed by a kind of contagion the obsession with domestic cleanliness and order (and Law and Order?) is also symptomatic of repression of anal impulses. And the development of the more or less rigid mechanisms of repression were surely prefigured by the gradual 'advances' in soup- and sauce-eating in the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>165</sup> in which contact became more and more improper. In Elias' formulation the distinction between excrement and food becomes blurred:

"If a child tries to touch something sticky, wet or greasy with his fingers, he is told: 'You must not do that, people do not do things like that'. And the displeasure towards such conduct which is thus aroused by the adult finally arises through habit, without being induced by another person."<sup>166</sup>

The notion of repression, then, is one with particular configurations according to the conjuncture. Dominique Laporte has suggested an interesting contrasting precursor to the repression necessary for the formation of the alienated atomized individual in post-industrial society:

"... tout se passe comme si l'espèce de refoulement qui semble caractériser sur cette manière l'émergence d'un discours du capitalisme avait été précédé dans les périodes antérieures par des figures différentes de la représentation qui s'apparenteraient bien plus au mode du déni. D'un déni

marqué de la volonté de maintenir à tout prix la croyance au pouvoir curatif et esthétique de l'excrément contre un savoir primordial qui n'aurait pas cessé de tenir la merde comme un mauvais objet."<sup>167</sup>

Thus the denial of this basically "bad object" involved a catalogue of (sometimes but not always quasi) scientific/medical uses for more or less obscure excrements: "l'eau de millefleurs" (distilled cow-pats); "stercus nigrum" (rats-droppings) used against constipation; "album graecum" (powdered dogshit) used for throat illnesses; urine used as a mouthwash to combat ulcers; faecal distillations as face lotions; not to mention the dozens of uses of urine listed by Pliny.<sup>168</sup> What is interesting here is not so much the veracity (or otherwise) of these accounts as the fact that they exist as literature. For Laporte this literature (of the 17th and 18th centuries) constituted an "érotique anale", a rediscovery of the positivity of excrement which had in fact been written of (at least) ever since Pliny and his contemporaries. If, as I have remarked elsewhere above, the period between the Middle Ages and the age of capitalism saw the gradual disappearance of the grotesque material bodily lower stratum and its celebration of regenerative excrement, this denial of shit as bad object was perhaps a lingering testimony to its positive aspect.

Another kind of perspective within which the development of recent forms of repression can be viewed is provided by Norman Brown. He borrows Mircea Eliade's<sup>169</sup> distinction between archaic and modern conceptions of time in relation to deep-seated guilt. Archaic time is cyclical, seasonal, even synchronic, and "cosmic guilt" would be dealt with by periodic expiation, hence the catharsis of the misrule/inversion festivals, of archaic forms of carni-

val. The 'modern' conception of time, by contrast, is linear (diachronic), progressive, and guilt is dealt with (most obviously in the major Western religions) through notions of ultimate redemption at the end of time. The guilt then has no way out, and must needs be repressed, sublimated.

"Sublimation is the defence mechanism characteristic of civilized man, undoing (expiation) the defence mechanism of archaic man."<sup>170</sup>

We can see how this relates to the above dual attitude to excrement. The rehabilitation of "good shit" and a celebration of its life-enhancing properties would have been a part of the inversion/misrule strategy of periodic expiation, whereas the sublimation of anality is a necessary corollary to the repression of feelings of guilt in a situation where redemption can only be posthumous.

"The modern consciousness represents an increased sense of guilt, more specifically a breakthrough from the unconscious of the truth that the burden of guilt is unpayable."<sup>171</sup>

Could it be that the Monty Python films are symptoms of a denial of repression which similarly allows the emergence of a more ambivalent excrement?

### 1.5 Language, excrement and power

This should be the last subsection before we begin, in Section II, to approach the work of Monty Python and its immediate context. Here I should like to draw together some of the ideas circulating above and to introduce some notions about language, power and the State; I hope the links with the excremental will emerge below. Let us start with language, and refer back to the reservation expressed above (pg.32) about Bakhtin's confidence in 'unofficial' language.

Bourdieu's thesis in 'Ce Que Parler Veut Dire' (footnote 89 above) about linguistic power and 'official' language stresses that it is neither the purely structural aspects of a linguistic system which determine its function or its efficacy, nor is it entirely the social context:

"Une sociologie structurale de la langue, instruite de Saussure mais construite contre l'abstraction qu'il opère, doit se donner pour objet la relation qui unit des systèmes structurés de différences linguistiques sociologiquement pertinentes et des systèmes également structurés de différences sociales."<sup>172</sup>

The central concepts in Bourdieu's analysis are those of linguistic competence, which is mediated by the family/class background and by 'official' education, the notion of linguistic capital, which is more or less available to the individual in any communication situation according to the family/class/school/further education to which he/she has been exposed, and the capacity to make distinctions about the appropriateness and effectivity of particular discourses in particular situations. Nor need these notions be seen as idle metaphor:

"Knowledge, information and specialized education are just as much parts of capital ('knowledge capital') as is the most elementary labour of the worker."<sup>173</sup>

The shrewd investment of linguistic capital on the linguistic market can then make a profit:

"... profit matériel et symbolique que les lois de formation des prix caractéristiques d'un certain marché promettent objectivement aux détenteurs d'un certain capital linguistique ... Cela signifie que les 'moeurs linguistiques' ne se laissent pas modifier par décrets comme le croient souvent les partisans d'une politique volontariste de 'défense de la langue'."<sup>174</sup>

Thus for example a person from a materially poor background with little parental support in any external education and a (therefore more than likely) relatively unstimulating school education is

likely to have linguistic capital limited to the peer-group and the immediate home environment. By contrast, one of the important functions performed by "interested middle-class parents" (with books in the house) or by a grammar-school kind of education is to furnish the school-leaver with a capacity for choice regarding where and how to invest linguistic capital. What is more, this will apply to everyday social situations as well as to finding a ('good') job, getting promotion etc., the latter corresponding to Bourdieu's "profit matériel" and the former to a diverse variety of "symbolic" profits in the area of friendship, satisfaction, power relations.

"... toutes les expressions verbales, qu'il s'agisse de propos échangés entre deux amis, du discours d'apparat d'un porte-parole autorisé ou d'un compte rendu scientifique, portent la marque de leurs conditions de réception et doivent une part de leurs propriétés (même au niveau de la grammaire) au fait que, sur la base d'une anticipation pratique des lois du marché considéré, leurs auteurs, le plus souvent sans le savoir ni le vouloir expressément, s'efforcent de maximiser le profit symbolique qu'ils peuvent obtenir de pratiques inséparablement destinées à la communication et exposées à l'évaluation."<sup>175</sup>

This kind of model fits very neatly with the notion of the education system as an Ideological State Apparatus; linguistic capital is subtly distributed in such a way that those who accept to exercise their capital on the market gain a profit and are, by and large, likely to be grateful to a system which has educated them to be able to do so, and will return a part of the (material) profit so that the Educational ISA may continue to function in the same way.

One common kind of "profit" is the acceptance/admiration to be gained by a politician or other public figure (who normally speaks 'official' language) when she/he condescends to use a language-system of lower status, such as a dialect. The point in an example cited by Bourdieu<sup>176</sup> is that the peasant does not possess the

linguistic capital (the ability to speak 'well' any language except, in this example, "béarnais") to make an effective political intervention - or rather to believe that he can make the intervention, for a large part of linguistic power depends on the widespread acceptance of a dominant official language.<sup>177</sup>

The greater bourgeois propensity for profit-making in general compared with the working class is one reason for the existence of levels of complexity of speech; Bourdieu has used his model to considerably modify Bernstein's notions of "elaborated" and "restricted" codes. Thus for instance Bourdieu identifies what Lakoff<sup>178</sup> has called "hedges" (phrases such as "sort of", "pretty much", "rather", "technically" etc.) as marks used in bourgeois speech to show a "neutralizing distance" from a discourse, a distance which allows the appearance of control, of distinction, so of power. These "hedges", then,

"... sont une affirmation d'une capacité de tenir ses distances à l'égard de ses propres propos, donc de ses propres intérêts, et du même coup à l'égard de ceux qui, ne sachant pas tenir cette distance, se laissent emporter par leurs propos, s'abandonnent sans retenue ni censure à la pulsion expressive."<sup>179</sup>

The aspect of this model which is of most interest here is that involving the "hexis corporelle" (something like "the way of inhabiting the body").

"Ce n'est pas par hasard que la distinction bourgeoise investit dans son rapport au langage l'intention même qu'elle engage dans son rapport au corps."<sup>180</sup>

In contrast to the distanced relation which the middle-class/bourgeois sensibility entertains in relation to both language and body, the 'popular'/working-class sensibility characteristically

refuses "airs and graces" and prefers what is rudely "natural". One example instanced by Bourdieu is the use of the words "bouche" and "gueule" for mouth, in

"... l'opposition, sexuellement surdéterminée, entre la bouche plutôt fermée, pincée, c'est à dire tendue et censurée, et par là féminine, et la gueule, largement et franchement ouverte, 'fendue' ... c'est à dire détendue et libre, et par là masculine."<sup>181</sup> (original emphasis)

Linked to these two words are a number of expressions which also perfectly illustrate the opposition: "bouche fine", "lèvres pincées", "bouche en cul-de-poule", "la petite bouche", expressions which all encapsulate distance, disdain, constipation, opposed to "grande gueule", "engueuler", "aller gueuler", "taire sa gueule", "dégueuler" etc., expressions concerned with directness, openness, sincerity, exaggeration, and contact with the outside world.

Once again the imagery is striking. "Gueule", an open mouth, "dégueuler", to be sick, and the positivity, the energy ... This is surely the language which Bakhtin describes as carnivalesque, which

"... is gay, triumphant, at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives."<sup>182</sup>

and which (cf. pg.31 above) at least contains elements of grotesque realism.

One final crucial question is: how did this happen? Given that there is now a system of power relations supporting a capitalist social formation, and that language plays an important role in maintaining those power relations, how did the particular sets of linguistic differences develop? Again I can offer only a few speculations (predictably, related to the excremental!).



Dominique Laporte begins his examination of this very question with a juxtaposition of the two 1539 edicts. For him, "si la langue est belle, c'est qu'un maître la lave".<sup>183</sup> Who cleans/washes, is the master and controls language. So that this language may remain strong, official, however, it needs to be fertilized from below,<sup>184</sup> by 'lower' languages', whilst denying this relation of dependence.

The fertilization idea ushers in the more central one of money (first as gold, then in its own right) and shit, and the many equivalences of the two:

"... l'odeur de l'ordure dure où l'or dort."<sup>185</sup>

In such a universe, a dialectic of two excremental visions exists:

"... un discours du riche qui associe le pauvre au vil, au bas, à la corruption, en un mot à la merde et un discours du pauvre qui suspecte toujours dans le luxe une corruption et reconnaît le riche à ce qu'il pue."<sup>186</sup>

The class-antagonistic nature of this relation should not obscure the origins of both discourses in the money/anal complex. We have already noted the role of sublimation in dealing with repressed anal anxieties, and we can also pick up again the theme of guilt.

"Money is human guilt with the dross refined away till it is a pure crystal of self-punishment; but it remains filthy because it remains guilt."<sup>187</sup>

Though at another point Brown (citing Ferenczi) comes close to contradicting this formulation,

"Money is the end result, which ... is seen to be nothing other than odourless dehydrated filth that has been made to shine."<sup>188</sup>

the crucial fact is that though money be odourless and dehydrated, this is not in itself sufficient to make it 'clean'.

We are constantly reminded of the ambivalence of money:

"... the assimilation of money with excrement does not render money valueless ... If money were not excrement, it would be valueless."<sup>189</sup>

Thus paradoxically, though money is a denial of excrement, a crystallisation of anal sublimation, it is the primaeval repressed value of shit that invests money with its worth.

"A new stage in the history of the money complex begins in modern times, with the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. On the one hand definitive sublimation is attained by a final repression of the awareness of the anal-erotic sources of the complex: up till then the pursuit of money appears to have been inhibited by the knowledge that lucre is filthy ... And on the other hand there is a turn against the sublimation, a withdrawal of libido from sublimation, a desexualization of the sublimation itself."<sup>190</sup>

This latter point reinforces the observation made above (pg.33) about the move in 'modern' sublimation towards a "death instinct".  
Further,

"The psychology of pre-capitalist hoarding differs from that of capitalist enterprise ... precisely in the fact that the accumulation, the gold or the real estate, yielded bodily satisfaction to the owner. True capitalism, on the other hand, as Marx said, is destroyed in its very foundation if we assume that its compelling motive is enjoyment instead of accumulation of wealth."<sup>191</sup>

In keeping with the "need" for an ever greater centralisation of the motors for reproducing capitalist ideologies, it is at least arguable that the central orchestrator in social life since (approximately) the 16th century has been the State. While in relation to many modern debates about ideology we can say with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith that

"... it is still not clear why the focus of these ideological relations is the State unless one does what Althusser does, which is to make the State the focus of ideological relations by definition."<sup>192</sup>

(with reservations about his mechanistic reading of Althusser), it is still at least useful to work with a definition suggested by

Nowell-Smith himself:

"The State is itself diffuse and its unity is always provisional, shored up by the various discourses which concur to assert it."<sup>193</sup>

The State may be described as the locus of reflection/dissemination of a cluster of broadly "dominant" ideologies concerning the family, the Church, communications, Law etc., always bearing in mind the overdeterminations to which all such apparata are subject. What this kind of definition stresses is the State's need to control symbolic areas as well as material ones; hence the washing of language, and the mechanisms analysed by Bourdieu. Hence a State which

"'chie de l'argent' ... inondant ses sujets de ses cadeaux, version symbolisée de la merde déposée par le tyran."<sup>194</sup>

The State is, then, seen by Laporte as the new Master, a view which has its possibilities provided the model is not used monolithically or as part of a 'conspiracy thesis'.

Linked to the growing power of the State over the 16th and 17th centuries were 'new' distinctions between public and private. As Bakhtin points out,

"On the one hand the State encroached on festive life and turned it into a parade; on the other hand these festivities were brought into the home and became part of the family's private life."<sup>195</sup>

and another factor exacerbating this movement of the private into the family and of the public into the State was the changing attitudes to excrement hastened by edicts such as those of 1539 in Paris and by other developments in the privatisation of excrement.

Privatisation of excrement is another 'effect' of the sublimation of anality discussed above. The link between this sublimation

and privatisation on the one hand, and the primacy (according to conventional psychoanalysis at least) of the phallus and socialisation on the other, is examined in some detail by Guy Hocquenghem.

"If phallic transcendence and the organization of society around the great signifier are to be possible, the anus must be privatized in individualized and oedipalised persons ... The anus has no social position except sublimation. The functions of this organ ... are the site of the formation of the person. The anus expresses privatization itself."<sup>196</sup>

That this has not always been so has been the contention of much of this section. We have concentrated on some historical evidence and sketched some of the psychoanalytic possibilities. For Hocquenghem,

"The great act of capitalist decoding is accompanied by the constitution of the individual; money, which must be privately owned in order to circulate, is indeed connected with the anus, insofar as the anus is the most private part of the individual. The constitution of the private, individual, 'proper' person is 'of the anus', the constitution of the public person is 'of the phallus'."<sup>197</sup>

This seems to be a restatement of Deleuze and Guattari's position:

"Our modern societies have instead undertaken a vast privatization of the organs, which corresponds to the decoding of flows that have become abstract. The first organ to suffer privatization, removal from the social field, was the anus. It was the anus that offered itself as a model for privatization, at the same time as money came to express the flows' new state of abstraction. Hence the relative truth of psychoanalytic remarks concerning the anal nature of monetary economy."<sup>198</sup>

To return to the link between money and shit, Laporte observes that the State was/(has always been) above/outside finance:

"... c'est en dehors de lui - du moins sur le théâtre du semblant - que se font les affaires, que les commerçants rémunèrent la merde."<sup>199</sup>

and that insofar as the State was 'obliged' to come into contact with money, the effect was to clean the money, to stamp it with a guarantee of cleanliness, the "non olet".<sup>200</sup>

Shit and dirty money are thus both pushed into the private sphere:

"Objet d'une politique, la merde se voit assignée être une chose privée, l'affaire de chaque sujet, de chaque propriétaire depuis le lieu de discours où s'incarnera l'autre terme du couple binaire public-privé: L'Etat, le public."<sup>201</sup>

Thus the cleanliness of the Paris streets was not the real issue in the 1539 edict; rather it was the new relation of the individual to her/his shit and to the State that was at stake.

"La disparition de l'objet-déchets est ici invoquée pour autoriser une transformation du rapport du sujet à sa merde qui inclut ce rapport dans le lien de dépendance où il tombe à l'égard de l'Etat absolu."<sup>202</sup>

I cannot here examine the detailed exposition offered by Laporte; for him the 16th century marked the beginning of the development of State tyranny with respect to the individual subject, a tyranny which he sees as

"... une extension infinie du public qui asseptise de la plus délirante façon les rapports sociaux pour maintenir le sujet immobile dans la position de l'oie gavée où il se voit, dans tous les sens du mot, comblé par l'Etat qui lui chie dans la bouche."<sup>203</sup>

I referred above (pg.49) to the move from 'denial of bad shit' towards a repressive mode. A lingering sign of the 'denial' mode in the 19th century may have been the existence of a number of elaborate treatises and calculation<sup>204</sup> concerned to argue the superior land-fertilizing potential of human shit. Thus from about the 1830's,

"... attention was directed to the usefulness of rubbish. The desire to recycle waste, in turn, stimulated olfactory vigilance ... Most discussion on excrement concerned its profitability ... Political economy evaluated excrement in terms of profit and loss ... Parent-Duchâtelet regarded the export of excrement as one of the capital's great potential resources ..."<sup>205</sup>

" the Search for profits led to the deodorisation of public space more surely than the obsession with unhealthiness ... " 206

Yet, this already represented a more alienated relation to bodily functions and to humanity. Writing of these 'coprologists', Laporte observes:

"L'utilitarisme forcené qu'ils déploient avec Bentham à l'endroit des fonctions physiologiques n'est pas sans lien avec le rapport qu'ils entretiennent avec leur propre corps." 207

The utilitarian impulse can indeed here be seen as a symptom of the bourgeois fear of loss, a vestige of the anxiety caused by the irredeemability of that which is lost with evanescent odour. In Alain Corbin's words,

"What disappeared or became volatile symbolized waste. The ephemeral could not be accumulated. The loss was irremediable. One could dream about recovering and reutilizing waste or about recycling excrement: evaporation was beyond hope. For the bourgeois there was something intolerable in this disappearance of the treasured products of his labour." 208

In the light of the above, then, the changes in excremental customs and attitudes and the role of 'official' language in relation to ideological work and power have at least a symptomatic relationship with the development of capitalism, and perhaps in some instances a determining one.

"Ce n'est donc pas par hasard qu'un système scolaire, qui ... entend façonner complètement les habitus des classes populaires, s'organise autour de l'inculcation d'un rapport avec le langage (avec l'abolition des langues régionales etc.), d'un rapport au corps (disciplines d'hygiène, de consommation, de sobriété etc.), et d'un rapport au temps (calcul, économie, épargne etc.)." 209

"Leur discours, homogène à celui du capitalisme, n'est pas le discours du capitalisme: il en est le symptôme." 210

2.

The Comedic: Return of the repressed.

"Man alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was compelled to invent laughter."

This section will seek to define some of the conceptual parameters which will inform the textual and contextual studies to be undertaken in the later sections.

The first subsection will deal with some of the key terms we shall be using, with some of the potentially useful definitions of comedy, and with the problematic relation between comedic pleasure and other forms of pleasure. This will be followed by subsections on the social, ideological and psychoanalytic functions which comedy/humour can fulfil, and on the ways in which these functions can interact. There will follow some consideration of specifically obscene/excremental and grotesque comedy and, finally, a few notes on the specificity of comedy in film/TV.

2.1 Defining terms, looking ahead.

(i) Defining some terms.

The first task which imposes itself is to make some sense of the variety of terms associated with the laughable: comedy, the comic, humour, jokes, wit.

There exists a 'classical' notion of comedy, generally defined in relation to "tragedy".

"Following Aristotle ... Cornford is able to say that if tragedy requires plot first of all, comedy is rooted so

firmly in 'character', its plot seems derivative, auxiliary, perhaps incidental."<sup>1</sup>

Such definitions and precepts tend to be very formal and to regard comedy as a 'form' to which an 'artist' fits 'his' creation. It is readily apparent that these are 'high-art' concepts which look down upon the "semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities."<sup>2</sup>

There also exist, of course, more sophisticated, more detailed examinations of 'comedy'. Important questions have been formulated:

"... whether 'what is comedy?' is in fact a question of critical theory, of psychology, of sociology or of metaphysics."<sup>3</sup>

but more often than not (at least in my experience) the classical notion of comedy has found it impossible to coexist with any adequate model of psychology or sociology: Merchant immediately follows the above lines with some short chapters cursorily dismissing these disciplines before settling into some more comfortable armchair literary criticism. We shall have occasion below to observe a much more interesting approach to comedy<sup>4</sup> similarly compromised by simplistic dismissals of important work in psychology and related areas.

This, then, is one idea of 'comedy' which will not be useful here. Another awkward notion is that of the 'comic'.

Insofar as the distinction operated by Freud between jokes and 'the comic' will be of some concern to us below, the term needs to be retained intact. The extension of its use to other contexts, however, (i.e. as an adjective derived from 'comedy') tends to be accompanied by connotations of 'second-rate comics', stand-up



comics, TV comics etc., and/or of 'childrens' comics'. The partisan nature of the connotations is well indicated by Gershon Legman:

"Just as the murder-stories for use by frustrated adults are politely euphemised as 'mysteries', just so the yearly half-billion violence-leaflets for children are camouflaged as 'funnies', as 'comics', as 'jokes', though there is never anything comical in them."<sup>5</sup>

I intend to evade these connotations by using the term 'comedic' wherever possible (precedents include British Film Institute Summer School material 1981 and subsequent BFI work in the area), which may be defined as "having the property of producing, under at least some specific circumstances, some comedic response." The word also allows for the distinction between comedy in general or a particular comedy, and 'comedicity', the state of an element defined as comedic.

The reference to Freud ushers in a further distinction, that between comedy (or the comic) and humour. In formulating his theoretical model of jokes and the comic he introduces his conception of humour as an additional or separate form of pleasure to be distinguished from the other two:

"The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis), and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling."<sup>6</sup> (original emphasis)

The idea appears in Freud's book to be something of an afterthought and is not defined with anything approaching the customary rigour. Mick Eaton makes this point, then comments upon Freud's later piece ('Humour', 1927):

"Again, Freud's writing on this topic is by no means contradictory, for at the beginning of this short essay humour is virtually synonymous with what he had earlier called 'the comic', as is the joke."<sup>7</sup>

The point here is not so much the shift itself as the lack of theoretical conviction. I shall employ the term as the 'largest' category, to include jokes, the comic, and other possible subdivisions.

"Comedy is part of the wider field of humour ... Comedy is of particular interest to sociologists because comedy is institutionalised humour."<sup>8</sup>

These terminological problems, it must be stressed, should not be taken lightly: there are structural differences between jokes and other instances of the comedic, the institutionalisation of comedy 'reflects' and contributes anew to particular social and cultural formations. In addition to this there are problems arising from the (necessarily) translated nature of Freud's work<sup>9</sup>; German words such as 'Witz', 'witzig', 'die Komik', 'Scherz', 'Humor' do not translate easily or directly into English, so the use of 'equivalents' in English is beset with difficulties. The editor of the Pelican translation (cf. footnote 9 above) points out some of these hazards but is then content to say

"It is much to be hoped that these difficulties, which are after all only superficial ones, will not deter readers ..."<sup>10</sup>

The difficulties are surely far from superficial; they reflect cultural differences which must be taken into account in any thorough study of humour or the comedic.

Though this study can perhaps not lay claim to any thoroughgoing analysis of Freud, one historically and culturally specific aspect of his work does suggest itself. Among the categories which Freud uses in describing jokes are the stupid/nonsensical and the absurd.<sup>11</sup> For him "moral backside" is absurd and is a "remarkable

epithet"; "breeches of respectability" is "an even more unusual juxtaposition". Some lines from Heinrich Heine ('Romanzero', BkIII, 'Hebräische Melodien'), translated as

... Till at last  
at last every button bursts  
on my breeches of patience

are for Freud "similarly bewildering".<sup>12</sup> If Freud's remarks seem strange to us now (?), the reasons may include the relative novelty of such rhetorical figures in his day. The result is a set of cultural assumptions which can vary drastically from writer to writer, from one context to another, but which will necessarily remain of a largely implicit nature.

Some sections of Freud's work on jokes, the comic and the unconscious will be of particular use here, namely the sections dealing with 'The purposes of jokes' (pp. 132-162), 'The mechanism of pleasure and the psychogenesis of jokes' (pp. 165-190), and 'The relation of jokes to dreams and to the unconscious' (pp. 215-138). The mechanisms and 'technique' of jokes will not be considered in any detail. Whilst Freud's distinction between jokes and 'the comic' will not be used in the analysis presented here, (beyond some considerations regarding the sites/'persons' necessary for a joke-structure (cf. pp.141-144 below), it will nevertheless be necessary to bear the distinction in mind when using his insights:

"We found ourselves obliged to locate the pleasure in jokes in the unconscious; no reason is to be found for making the same localisation in the case of the comic. On the contrary, all the analyses we have hitherto made have pointed to the source of comic pleasure being the comparison between two expenditures both of which must be ascribed to the pre-conscious. Jokes and the comic are distinguished first and foremost in their psychical localisation; the joke, it may be said, is the contribution made to the comic from the realm of the unconscious."<sup>13</sup> (original emphasis)

Let us return briefly to our (inclusive) category of comedy/the comedic.

"To the extent that comedy is a mode of signification, it shares aspects not only of the comic but also of the joke. The issue then is the extent to which and the ways in which comedy combines aspects of the comic and the joke, and the extent to which and the ways in which it involves the two different structures associated with them."<sup>14</sup>

To reiterate: while the distinction between jokes and 'the comic' will not be of central concern, it will need to be borne carefully in mind.

In the work which will (eventually) follow on the comedic in relation to one particular Monty Python film, there will be an essential need for some kind of "reception aesthetic", for a mode of analysis of how and why specific subjects (or groups or subjects) react to filmic elements, comedic or otherwise. The mode of analysis will emerge at the ordained moment; let us first look at how the comedic has hitherto been seen in relation to its conditions of reception.

(ii) Defining the comedic.

"A jest's prosperity lies in the ear  
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue  
Of him that makes it ..." (William Shakespeare, 'Love's Labour's Lost' Act V Sc. 2)

What 'is' a jest? Can something be 'inherently funny'? Can the comedic be defined in the abstract, in terms of its 'form' or of its 'content'? Henri Bergson explicitly defined his project (admittedly a 'lay' piece) as a search for an "abstract formula"<sup>15</sup> to define comedy. Freud himself strongly implies such an 'absolute':

"... there are cases in which the comic appears habitually and as though by force of necessity, and on the contrary

others in which it seems entirely dependent on the circumstances and on the standpoint of the observer."<sup>16</sup>

and cautiously opines that

"the absolute comic exists only in exceptional circumstances."<sup>17</sup>

There have been a great many attempts to 'define' comedy, characterised often by titles such as 'The Essence of Comedy' (L.C. Knights), 'The Argument of Comedy' (Northrop Frye), 'The Meaning of Comedy' (James Feibleman) or 'Comedy: Meaning and Form' (Robert Corrigan).<sup>18</sup> La Fave seems to stand out as an unusual theorist.

"His greatest originality as a humour theorist, over a period of almost two decades, is probably his denial of the existence of humour."<sup>19</sup>

Such curiosities notwithstanding, however, Chris Wilson's view appears sound:

"Humour is everywhere, but seems to defy examination. Theories of its nature seem facile or simplistic, and are themselves laughable ... In repetitive, subjective originality, stale platitudes have been refluxed as fresh insights."<sup>20</sup>

Whilst the bulk of the literature thus falls more or less into the 'classical' camp, there have nevertheless been a number of interesting observations made (often in passing) by specific writers. What follows is a selective sample of a very few of the more pertinent insights concerning the mechanisms 'inherent' to the comedic.

Among the brasher claims is that voiced by John Palmer.

"How shall we tell our reader that comedy, whatever the tongue or the fashion of its delivery, is always comedy."<sup>21</sup>

A more modest variant is furnished by Bergson:

"The comic spirit ... conjures up ... visions that are at

once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group."<sup>22</sup>

Bergson's central paradigm is one of mechanisation, of automatisa-  
tion. For him comedy does not properly exist outside of the human,  
and depends for its various manifestations on a number of (inge-  
niously formulated) variants of "the mechanical encrusted on the  
living",<sup>23</sup> the mechanical being strongly associated here with a kind  
of unconsciousness:

"... a comic character is generally comic in proportion to  
his ignorance of himself. The comic person is uncon-  
scious."<sup>24</sup>

Unconscious use of the body then becomes 'comic':

"The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are  
laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a  
mere machine ..."<sup>25</sup>

"We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of  
being a thing."<sup>26</sup>

- incidentally the source, for Bergson, of the comedic potential of  
hypnotism and its effects. The notion of the mechanical is also  
extended to actions and events:

"Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us,  
in a single combination, the illusion of life and the dis-  
tinct impression of a mechanical arrangement."<sup>27</sup>

As Klaus Theweleit observes,

"As bourgeois individuals, we have been brought up to think  
of ourselves as totalities, and unique ones at that. To  
this bourgeois mind ... we cannot be anything like  
'machines' ..."<sup>28</sup>

Bergson's observations on the mechanisms of humour in many cases  
have a ring of truth about them, and possess a definite heuristic  
value - indeed they correlate surprisingly well with a number of  
Freud's findings. The assumptions about 'society' betrayed by  
Bergson, however, return us abruptly to square one:

"Laughter is simply the result of a mechanism set up in us by

nature, or, what is almost the same thing, by our long acquaintance with social life."<sup>29</sup>

Among Bergson's formulations we find the following:

"A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."<sup>30</sup>

Whilst this is also very similar to Freud's writing on the joke-technique of "multiple use of the same material" and "double meanings",<sup>31</sup> the most startling comparison is with the model developed by Arthur Koestler.<sup>32</sup>

In Koestler's view, a comic response can be expected when two discourses (or modes of discourse) existing in two different 'planes' come together; in Samuel Johnson's words, "... the unexpected copulating of ideas."<sup>33</sup>

Koestler's model is a very elaborate one. He does not himself use the term 'discourse', but defines the planes in which the ideas or speech would exist in mathematical terms: the planes are described as "matrices of thought" or as "matrices of behaviour", a matrix being "any ability or pattern of ordered thought or behaviour governed by the appropriate codes."<sup>34</sup>

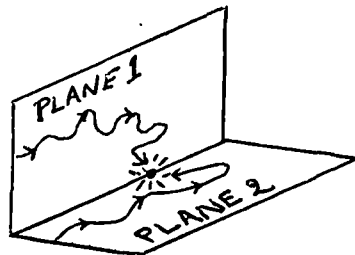


Fig.1 Koestler's Bisociation Model

"... the clash of the two mutually incompatible codes or associative contexts explodes the tension ..."35

The name given by Koestler to this meeting of more or less incompatible or surprising ideas/discourses is bisociation (cf. Fig.1).

His notion of energy discharge also has a Freudian ring:

"Sudden bisociation of a mental event with two habitually incompatible matrices results in an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one associative context to another. The emotive charge which the narrative carried cannot be so transferred owing to its greater inertia and persistence; discarded by reason, the tension finds its outlet in laughter."36

Koestler in fact goes on to analyse a number of varieties of humour: he attempts to determine the two sets of matrices (the two planes) and to identify the points at which bisociation occurs. Thus for example,

"The pun is the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings - two strings of meaning tied together by an acoustic knot."37

This is not the last we shall hear of Koestler's ingenious model; we shall have cause to refer to it again. The idea of an "explosion of laughter" as a product of bisociation, however, does beg the question of how the moments of bisociation are to be determined in practice.

The comedic can surely only ultimately be defined in relation to some response evoked in the receiving subject. Though it is obviously possible to define various 'textual' properties of the comedic (the explicit project of Bergson and Koestler among many others), an adequate definition of "comic response" would seem to be a more serious problem.

"... each theory of comedy faces a double task: to account for comic forms, i.e. the laws of comic discourse, literary/dramatic/(filmic), and to account for the phenomenon of laughter, and of course to relate the two. Perhaps, in dif-



ferent ways, each theory of comedy has shattered or distended itself on this double task. The more successful theories, notably Freud's, tend to concentrate on one of the tasks and ignore the other, though this entails incompleteness."<sup>38</sup>

Here is a definition of the comedic which makes no claim to be entertaining.

"Most commonly ... laughter is induced by the informational content of stimulus patterns (external or internal) or patterns of thought, containing several items of information in particular kinds of juxtaposition or sequence."<sup>39</sup>

Laughter and smiling are clearly the most 'adequate' comic responses. Yet it is quite obvious that 'comedy' frequently does not evoke laughter at any level. Does this mean we are wrong to call it comedy? We are reminded of our definition of the comedic (pg.63 above), which includes the phrase "under at least some specific circumstances". This throws up the interesting question of the history of laughter. There have been a number of claims that laughter "is dead, dying, sick ..."; James Sully wrote lamenting "the marginalization of 'gelasts' (laughers)". Anecdotes about people dying of laughter and about prejudice against laughter ("habitual laughers are habitually ignorant, vulgar and uncultivated" - George Vasey 1875) indicate that the problem is not new.<sup>46</sup> A more ambitious study would need to take into account the 'objective' conditions of existence of social groupings (recently classes) in particular historical conjunctures and look at the ideological functions for which laughter is deployed.

In this sense 'the comedic', or 'a com(ed)ic element' is an always-inadequate designation. It refers to a discursive element which may (just remotely possibly? only for particular social

groupings? only for subjects in toxic states? almost certainly?) evoke a comic response. Either there has to be some other definition of 'comic response' which goes beyond the phenomenological surface of laughing/smiling, or else we have to accept that (theoretically) any discursive element may, under specific circumstances, be decoded as comedic. The question then becomes (as it always tends to anyway) how specific decodings are effected in determinate situations.

Again a large number of attempts have been made to classify and assess 'theories' of comedy/humour. One of the most concise appears to be that of Patricia Keith-Spiegel,<sup>41</sup> which cuts across some of the work being carried out here and which is worth a brief summary. The principal types of theory in her classification include:

1. Biological, instinct and evolution theories: utilitarian purpose of laughter, humour as vestige of adaptive behaviour.
2. Superiority theories: origins in Aristotle, Plato, elation of favourable comparison with regard to others less fortunate, Hobbes. Freud's awareness of this.
3. Incongruity theories: humour arising from ill-suited pairings of ideas/situations. Bergson cited as example. (Koestler also seems to fit here).
4. Surprise theories: Suddenness or unexpectedness as important in much humour. Links with incongruity theory.
5. Ambivalence theories: Laughter as result of incompatible feelings or emotions (as opposed to ideas or perceptions which are basis of incongruity theories).
6. Release and Relief theories: (e.g. Klein) Release of tension which 'controlled thinking' cannot control, humorous experience as "alleviating the strain involved in sustained attention".
7. Configurational theories: coming-together of originally unrelated elements. 'Falling into place' or 'sudden insight' as source of amusement. Jerry Palmer's 'peripeteia'.

8. Psychoanalytic theories: especially Freud; economy of psychic energy.

This is not the place to attempt any more extended exposition or critique of such a classification. We can simply note in passing the most apparent kinship between 'release and relief theories' and 'psychoanalytic theories', and between 'incongruity', 'surprise', 'ambivalence' and 'configurational' theories. There is also a link between the 'superiority' idea and Freud's work, as we shall see below. Indeed it is the psychoanalytic orientation which will be favoured here, with some consideration also given to the kind of incongruity theory favoured by Koestler.

Returning, then, to the question posed above (pg.66), it would appear that though it may be possible to identify some of the structural characteristics of typically comedic elements, it is not possible to assert that any element (joke, gag, sketch, line) is 'inherently' or 'immanently' comedic. The more important factor is the specific context which confers comedicity; this context includes the production of the putatively comedic element (Freud's analysis of one of Heine's jokes in the light of the latter's family background/psychology is a good example of such an approach<sup>42</sup>) and the social and psychoanalytic context in which the element is received and decoded.

The categories of the social, ideological and psychoanalytic will serve to define much of the work which follows, particularly that of section 2.2. It may be useful at this point, however, to dispose (temporarily) of a problem raised by the above references to laughter. Is it possible to distinguish between comedic/humorous

pleasure and other forms of pleasure, and how will this affect our definition of the comedic?

(iii) Pleasure.

"A cheerful mood, whether it is produced endogenously or toxically, reduces the inhibiting forces, criticism among them, and makes accessible once again sources of pleasure which were under the weight of suppression."<sup>43</sup>

In fact this area is a vast one which can be tackled at a number of levels of varying complexity/abstruseness.<sup>44</sup> A convenient starting-point is probably the pre-symbolic phase in which Freud's pleasure-principle dominates: the time of life when the infant experiences its body simultaneously as fragmented and as unified with (usually) the mother, when pleasures are directly sensorial, untroubled by the guilts and repressions of socialisation. As the small child 'plays', notably working out its own versions of the "fort-da game", it learns new pleasures:

"... pleasurable effects, which arise from the repetition of what is similar, a rediscovery of what is familiar, similarity of sound etc..."<sup>45</sup>

Freud's original description of the fort-da game (fort=away, da=there) involved a small child using a cotton-reel with a piece of string tied to it to throw away the reel whilst uttering "ooh" (an attempt at "fort"), then to pull it back again with the string whilst uttering a "joyful" "da". The child would repeat this exercise many times on a number of occasions.<sup>46</sup> Leaving aside the problem of linguistic specificity (have similar observations been carried out with, say, English-'speaking' infants, and if so, what do they "say" instead of "ooh" and "da"?), it does seem to be the case that the game represents a gaining of psychic 'control' over

the repeated absences of the mother. Of course if a cotton-reel conveniently tied to a piece of string is not to hand, some other game can easily be found as a 'coping' mechanism to compensate for the mother's absence. Indeed games such as hide-and-seek and, later, chasing games, can easily be seen as variants of this early coping mechanism.

The significance of this early play with presence and absence for a Lacanian 'model' is summarized very succinctly by Anika Lemaire:

"In a first act of symbolisation, the child removes himself from the urgency of an event - his mother's disappearance and reappearance - by replacing it with a symbol:- the appearance and disappearance of the reel ... By their alternation, the two phonemes ... will in turn symbolise the disappearance and reappearance of the reel. The distancing of the lived experience is effected in two stages: the child moves from the mother to the reel and finally to language ... Such an experience may be considered the inaugural moment of all future displacement, all metaphors and all language."<sup>47</sup>

Since also

"Pleasure is always defined by Freud as the sensation marking the end of a state of tension."<sup>48</sup>

it follows that for pleasure to be repeated a new tension has to be produced (the cotton-reel has to be 'lost' again). The installation of repetition as pleasurable thus also inaugurates a circulation of desire, this last being progressively defined in relation to various sets of signifiers in a manner which need not be of concern to us here. The signified is ultimately inaccessible to language, life in symbolisation is an inescapable relay of signifiers, and

"As Lacan would say, no-one can in fact say "I enjoy (je jouis)" ('jouir' also has the slang meaning 'to come' -transl. note) unless he or she is referring to past pleasure or pleasure to come, because as soon as he or she begins to speak, the subject ceases to enjoy (jouir) in the

true sense, or, what amounts to the same thing, ceases to be annulled as subject."<sup>49</sup>

We have, then, (for better or worse) a way of theorising the pleasure of repetition. Anticipating some work on joke-structure below, we find that

"The joke and the fort/da both involve 'the use of language and a certain pleasure in repetition'. Both involve also 'the loss of object that defines the structure of desire'. And both involve an aggression against the absent object as a corollary of the desire to master its absence ..."<sup>50</sup>

If Freud has got it right, then, joke-telling is a displaced re-enactment of the trauma of the absent object, of the absent mother. Indeed he himself was inclined to the opinion that

"... the subjective determinants of the joke-work are not far removed from those of neurotic illness ..."<sup>51</sup>

We can also note in passing that Bergson, who in most respects appears to have been quite oblivious to the notion of the unconscious being developed by his contemporary Freud, nevertheless accurately pinpointed the origin of much comedy in the childlike pleasure of repetition, and even devoted several pages to a consideration of specific games and toys and the parallels with comedy. We find a reference to

"... a spring of a moral type, an idea first expressed, then repressed, then expressed again ..."<sup>52</sup>

and another reference to 'repression':

"In a comic repetition of words we generally find two terms: a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring, and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew."<sup>53</sup>

The compulsion to repeat has another, broader relation to the comedic, that of the repetition of successful 'formulae', for instance in jokes ("Mummy, mummy ... shut up and ..." or "What do

you call a ...?"), in the repetition of comedic characters/  
stereotypes in books, films, TV series etc., or in generic/  
structural/institutional aspects of TV sitcom, music-hall etc. If  
we recall Koestler's bisociation model, we may say with him that

"... the mediocre cartoonist and other professional craftsmen  
of the comic operate mostly with the same familiar matrices,  
fixed at a given angle ... governed by familiar rules of the  
game ... and their task is reduced to devising new  
links:-puns, gags, pegs for parody. It is a mechanised kind  
of bisociative technique."<sup>54</sup>

We shall touch upon the infantile origins of the comedic again  
below; let us for the moment pursue a little further the notion of  
repetition. Another way of describing the infant's retrieval of the  
cotton-reel in the above 'game' is as the rediscovery of what is  
familiar. When, through entry into symbolisation and rationalized  
thought-processes, the child begins to recognize and to remember,  
the same 'game' is effectively being replayed.

"In view of the close connection between recognizing and  
remembering it is not rash to suppose that there may also be  
a pleasure in remembering - that the act of remembering is  
in itself accompanied by a feeling of pleasure of similar  
origin."<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that the pleasures of recognition and remembering play  
an important part in most aspects of human life, and that in film  
and TV 'comedy' such pleasures are intimately mingled with other  
properly 'comedic' pleasures. This idea was not new when it was  
used in a 1970 episode of I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again:

"... Bill Oddie demonstrates, quite independently, a theory  
which Spike Milligan had also evolved some nineteen years  
earlier in The Goon Show - that an audience will laugh at  
anything, no matter how meaningless, if it is only repeated  
often enough. The cast sets out to do this with the work  
'teapot' ..."<sup>56</sup>

A clear parallel of this is the repeated use of particular names/  
place-names in the course of a particular TV comedy series, the

mention of one of which is in itself calculated to evoke amusement. Neasden, Purley, and Des O'Connor are among many to have suffered this fate.

Further, repeated viewing of a favourite programme or film is clearly often a source of pleasure; other factors such as group reinforcement are relevant here, but the psychic mechanism remains in place. When Monty Python's 'Dead Parrot' sketch was originally recorded for TV,

"the reaction all this gets from the original audience is quite good, but nothing compared with later stage performances where the sketch was noisily hailed as an old friend and got hysterical reactions all the way through."<sup>57</sup>

Both on TV and on stage the recognition of a favourite performer/group is also clearly pleasurable. During a live performance of some of the Monty Python TV material at Drury Lane in 1974,

"Cleese was puzzled by the reactions of the audience - they would applaud a sketch upon recognizing it, laugh a moderate amount through it, and then clap and cheer enthusiastically at the end. It began to make sense when he realized that the show was really the equivalent of a pop concert, and that the audience were celebrating the performance of old favourites."<sup>58</sup>

The recognition of a favourite comedian certainly contributes to a

"... favourable effect ... produced by an expectation of the comic ... being attuned to comic pleasure."<sup>59</sup>

and Freud is also correct in identifying the enjoyment of repeated laughter:

"In the last resort it is in the recollection of having laughed and in the expectation of laughing that he laughs when he sees the comic actor come onto the stage, before the latter can have made any attempt at making him laugh."<sup>60</sup>

Yet we must not forget that another kind of pleasure, that of recognition/remembering, is independent of the comedic.



We can tentatively go a little further still and note that intellectual activity itself, indeed thought as such, has been seen by a number of writers as holding hidden pleasures:

"If we do not require our mental apparatus at the moment for supplying one of our indispensable satisfactions, we allow it itself to work in the direction of pleasure from its own activity ... As regards joking ... it is an activity which aims at deriving pleasure from mental processes, whether intellectual or otherwise."<sup>61</sup>

In another place Freud writes that the desire for knowledge is at bottom an offshoot, sublimated and raised to the intellectual sphere, of the possessive instinct.

"Knowing the truth, understanding, is certainly a major source of pleasure."<sup>62</sup>

This tendency towards mastery, towards an unconditional control and knowledge of desire, can tip over into the perverse:

"... the desire to know and to investigate are not entirely unproblematic; when an intellectual process is shown and examined it enters immediately into the sexual fantasy of infantile investigation ... in their extreme form slide from epistemology into epistemophilia (the concept denoting the perversion of the desire to know)."<sup>63</sup>

The fundamental nature of these intellectual/possessive pleasures can, as we have already noted (pg.38), be seen as anal. This origin does not necessarily concern us at the moment, but the existence of such other pleasures does. The analysis of the comedic in Monty Python films will be complicated not only by the pleasures of recognition<sup>64</sup> and repetition, but by the pleasures of intellectual 'play'. Monty Python films (and even more so the TV programmes and derivatives) are littered with literary, aesthetic and other references: for example the discussion of swallows' ability to carry coconuts in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, the begging and bartering sequences in Monty Python's Life of Brian, and the references to Nietzsche in The Meaning of Life. The pleasure to be

obtained from these sequences/films - and this applies also to the surreal/absurdist undertow present in all of them - requires a particular kind of cultural capital on the part of the viewing subject. Assumptions about the likely audience are exemplified by the final line of the 'Foreword' of the Meaning of Life book:

"... and remember, if you're not completely satisfied with this book after you've thoroughly perused its contents then you're stupid and worthless."<sup>65</sup>

Another example occurs in a Monty Python TV sketch which is 'interrupted' and stopped by the Graham Chapman colonel character; as the sketch disintegrates, Terry Jones says "the general public's not going to understand this, are they?"

This notion of cultural capital will be of some importance when we come to look at specific audience responses to Meaning of Life, indeed also when we come to look at some of the textual strategies deployed (mockery, superiority, incongruity) in the field of the comedic.

Let us note that our model of pleasure is by no means the only one possible. In what appears (to me) as a "retreat from theory", a mark of frustration, a number of French (and latterly British) thinkers/writers have affirmed a re-reading of Nietzsche in developing the notion of the "libidinal body", of "libidinal economy".<sup>66</sup>

"Maybe indeed the deeper subject is here; not 'pleasure' but the libidinal body itself, and its peculiar politics, which may well move in a realm largely beyond the 'pleasurable' in that narrow, culinary bourgeois sense."<sup>67</sup>

The critique of psychoanalysis and Marxism may be timely and necessary, but the reduction to undifferentiated pluralism which the

'new' philosophy seems sometimes to encourage should be no substitute for a properly materialist incentive. One such critique does seem to have kept at least one foot on materialist ground and has already been referred to a number of times, and is worth a detour here since it serves to situate a number of the psychoanalytic notions running through this thesis. This is Deleuze and Guattari's 'Anti-Oedipus'. We have already noted Campioni and Gross's work on the specificity of Freudian psychoanalytic concepts (pp.42-45 above); Deleuze and Guattari furnish a much more fundamental critique of the nature of the psychoanalytic project and of its place in the perpetuation of the Oedipal tyranny. For them, the 'real' material unconscious is outside (or rather beneath) ideology; it does not mean anything, it is beyond representation, does not signify; "it is an orphan"<sup>68</sup>; it functions rather through a more or less infinite series of desiring-machines and partial objets, which are in principle infinitely adaptable/flexible. Their possibilities are evoked by Bruckner and Finkielkraut:

"A la bipartition classique du haut et du bas, du noble et du bestial, sachons substituer un poudrolement où le sexe, la tête et les bras ne soient chaque fois jamais la même chose ... dégageons-nous de la croyance au fonctionnel, au naturel (la bouche peut être un sexe, le sexe une bouche, le cul machine à avaler ...) et plus de recentrement sournois mais une partialisation à l'infini. Coupons, coupons dans la belle totalité de l'organisme ..."<sup>69</sup>

Having elucidated a more or less original model of unconscious processes, Deleuze and Guattari unfold their twofold project.

The first part of this is to analyse how the freely producing unconscious has been progressively enslaved by the Earth, by the Despot and by Capital.

"Desire institutes a libidinal investment of a State machine that overcodes the territorial machine, and with an addi-

tional turn of the screw, represses the desiring-machines."<sup>70</sup>

Instrumental in this process are a number of classical psychoanalytic terms, to which Deleuze and Guattari return insistently. The move to representation and signification is central:

"From the moment desire is made to depend on the signifier, it is put back under the yoke of a despotism whose effect is castration, there where one recognizes the stroke of the signifier itself; but the sign of desire is never signifying, it exists in the thousands of productive break-flows that never allow themselves to be signified within the unary stroke of castration."<sup>71</sup>

The abundant flows of the productive unconscious have little chance when faced with the phallus.

"For the phallus has never been either the object or the cause of desire, but is itself the castrating apparatus, the machine for putting lack into desire, for drying up all the flows, and for making all the breaks from the outside and from the Real into one and the same break with the outside, with the Real."<sup>72</sup> (original emphasis)

Klaus Theweleit describes some of the flows which are dried up:

"At some point, his bodily fluids must have been negativised to such an extent that they became the physical manifestation of all that was terrifying. Included in this category were all of the hybrid substances that were produced by the body and flowed on, in, over and out of the body; the floods and stickiness of sucking kisses; the swamps of the vagina, with their slime and mire; the pap and slime of male semen; the film of sweat that settles on the stomach, thighs and in the anal crevice, and that turns two pelvic regions into a subtropical landscape; the slimy stream of menstruation; the damp spots wherever bodies touch; the warmth that dissolves bodily boundaries ... Also the floods of orgasm; the streams of semen, the streams of relaxation flowing through the musculature, the streams of blood from bitten lips, the sticky wetness of hair soaked with sweat. And all the flowing delights of infancy: the warm piss-stream running down naked legs; the mire and pulp of fresh shit in the infant's diapers, the fragrant warmth that lets the body expand, the milk-stream from the mother's breast, the smacking of lips on the comforter, the sweet pap that spreads over hands and face, the sucking on a never-ending thumb, the good-tasting stream of snot running from the nose into the mouth, not to mention the liberating stream of hot tears that turns a mask into a pulp and then a face again."<sup>73</sup>

Thus castration and the installation of lack become crucial to

anthropomorphic (as opposed to polymorphously-perverse) sexuality, and desire itself becomes (re)defined within these parameters:

"From the structure there arises the most austere song in honour of castration,- yes, yes, we enter the order of desire through the gates of castration - once desiring-production has spread out in the space of representation that allows it to go on living only as an absence and a lack unto itself. For a structural unity is imposed on the desiring-machines that joins them together in a molar aggregate; the partial objects are referred to a totality that can appear only as that which the partial objects lack ..."<sup>74</sup>

The whole edifice is supported by the Oedipal triangulation, the derisory 'mummy-daddy-me' within which the drama of a displaced desire is played out and within which contemporary human sexuality is trapped, the "dirty little familial secret." Crucially, for Deleuze and Guattari, Oedipus is a displaced object of repression which conceals that which is really being repressed.

"... the general social repression-psychic repression system gives rise to an Oedipal image as a disfiguration of the repressed. The fact that this image in turn suffers a repression ... such is the long history of our society. But the repressed is not first of all the Oedipal representation. What is repressed is desiring-production. It is the part of this production that does not enter into social production or reproduction. It is what would introduce disorder and revolution into the socius, the noncoded flows of desire."<sup>75</sup>

"Indeed, this is how social repression prolongs itself by means of a psychic repression without which it would have no grip on desire. What is desired is the intense germinal or generative flow, where one would look in vain for persons or even functions discernible as father, mother, son, sister etc., since these names only designate intensive variations on the full body of the earth ..."<sup>76</sup>

As we have indicated (pp.37 & 43 above), the conditions for such psychoanalytic configurations have not always been so favourable:

"But the mother as the simulacrum of territoriality, the father as the simulacrum of the despotic law, with the slashed, split, castrated ego, are the products of capitalism insofar as it engineers an operation that has no equivalent in the other social formations."<sup>77</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari's second chief aim is to oppose psychoanalysis in its collusion with capital.

"... the tie linking psychoanalysis with capitalism is not merely ideological; it is infinitely closer, infinitely tighter; ... psychoanalysis depends directly on an economic mechanism (whence its relation with money) through which the decoded flows of desire, as taken up in the axiomatic of capitalism, must necessarily be reduced to a familial field where the operation of the axiomatic is carried out."<sup>78</sup>

It is then within this familial field that psychoanalysis sets up its stall; Oedipus takes on the ideological function of legitimating both a social formation and the family as agent of social reproduction.

"... social repression needs psychic repression precisely in order to form docile subjects and to ensure the reproduction of the social formation, including its repressive structures."<sup>79</sup>

Though Deleuze and Guattari seem for the most part to work with a relatively crude conception of 'ideology', formulations such as the above are close to the sense of Althusser (cf. pg.131 below), and the unconscious imaginary relation through which reality is ideologized in Hirst's appropriation of Althusser is nicely paralleled in Deleuze and Guattari's view of psychoanalysis:

"Psychoanalysis states clearly that unconscious representation can never be apprehended independently of the deformations, disguises and displacements it undergoes ..."<sup>80</sup>

It is precisely this 'false' 'ideological' version of the unconscious which Deleuze and Guattari are concerned to overturn, with the aid of the radical process of schizoanalysis. The objective would be to redefine and re-experience desire outside the familiar familialist triangle.

"Yet what was the other direction, glimpsed for a moment by Freud apropos of the familial romance, before the Oedipal trapdoor slams shut? ... Wouldn't the Great Other, indispensable to the position of desire, be the social other, social difference apprehended and invested as the nonfamily within the family itself? The other class is by no means

grasped by the libido as a magnified or impoverished image of the mother, but as the foreign, the nonmother, the nonfather, the nonfamily, the index of what is nonhuman in sex, and without which the libido would not assemble its desiring-machines."<sup>81</sup> (original emphasis)

Precisely defined, schizoanalysis would have two stages:

"... the destruction of the expressive pseudo-forms of the unconscious, and the discovery of desire's unconscious investments of the social field."<sup>82</sup>

And destruction is exactly what Deleuze and Guattari mean:

"Destroy, destroy. The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction - a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage. Destroy Oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration."<sup>83</sup>

"Shit on your whole mortifying, imaginary and symbolic theatre. What does schizoanalysis ask? Nothing more than a bit of a relation to the outside, a little real reality. And we claim the right to a radical laxity, a radical incompetence - the right to enter the analyst's office and say it smells bad there. It reeks of the great death and the little ego."<sup>84</sup> (original emphasis)

The radical new form of analysis would open the window, dispel the smell, and begin to de-Oedipalise the unconscious in order to liberate the flows on the primaeval-anoedipal body without organs. The desiring-machines, condemned in capitalism to representationality and to antiproduction,

"... representation was substituted for the units of production of the unconscious; and an unconscious that was capable of nothing but expressing itself - in myth, tragedy, dreams,- was substituted for the productive unconscious."<sup>85</sup>

would come to life and return to their full polyvocal unsignifying productivity:

"One then reaches the region of a productive, molecular, micrological or microphysical unconscious that no longer means or represents anything."<sup>86</sup>

The bipolar sexual model so suited to the Oedipal configuration would be dissolved<sup>87</sup> in favour of a polyvalent use of desiring-machines:

"Schizoanalysis is the variable analysis of the n sexes in a subject, beyond the anthropomorphic representation that society imposed on this subject, and with which it represents its own sexuality. The schizoanalytic slogan of the desiring-revolution will be first of all: to each its own sexes."<sup>88</sup>

It is interesting in this context to note Python Graham Chapman's reported view of sex-roles:

"Maybe ... you shouldn't treat children as being different sexes at all. I think that's the ideal situation, actually, because children aren't different sexes, and neither, for that matter are adults. In my experience, going to bed with a man and going to bed with a woman is totally similar - absolutely totally similar."<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps he doesn't need schizoanalysis!

The 'real' unconscious would return, the material unconscious beneath ideology, an unconscious provocatively shematized by Deleuze and Guattari:

"... an unconscious that is material rather than ideological; schizophrenic rather than Oedipal; nonfigurative rather than imaginary; real rather than symbolic; machinic rather than structural ... molecular, microphysical and micrological rather than molar or gregarious; productive rather than expressive."<sup>90</sup>

The result, not surprisingly, would be a revolutionary transformation of the individual; with the dissolution of the ego and its Oedipal baggage the libidinal economy would function for the sake of functioning.

"We use the term 'libido' to designate the specific energy of desiring-machines; and the transformations of this energy ... are never desexualisations or sublimations."<sup>91</sup>

Gone from the libidinal 'economy' would be notions of gain, profit, perhaps of value. Gone also would be the need for any more or less Freudian model of the comedic as economising-machine. Were the desiring-flows to be liberated in the way described by Deleuze and



Guattari, there would be no stratification of levels of consciousness, no repression, no anxiety to be displaced/sublimated, no neurosis.

If the arguments of Deleuze and Guattari at first seem anti-materialist and obscurantist, I think they are ultimately clear and convincing. Of course there are always loose ends, unresolved ambiguities, but if we take their own definition of materialist psychiatry as

"... the psychiatry that introduces the concept of production into considerations of the problem of desire."<sup>92</sup>

then their contribution is at least as cogent as the attempt to marry Marxism and psychoanalysis of, say, Althusser or Coward and Ellis.<sup>93</sup>

The merits of their work apart, however, the fact is that in our particular conjuncture, though we can take on board Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the Oedipal and of its crucial servicing role with regard to capitalism, though we may see the polemic validity of the freedom-through-schizoanalysis thesis, we are (subjugated) subjects who do operate within ideology; we inhabit psychic structures (more or less firmly under the yoke of Oedipus) which it is still correct to speak of with a vocabulary of repression, sublimation and so on. Deleuze and Guattari's 'Anti-Oedipus' can therefore serve to check a use of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which could otherwise risk complacency and lack of critical distance.

Having defined some of the concepts we shall be dealing with and looked forward obliquely to some of the likely problems, then, we can take a closer look at some of the functions of the comedic.

## 2.2 Social, ideological and psychoanalytic functions of the comedic.

### (i) Social/ideological functions.

For the purposes of this overview it will be convenient to identify four kinds of functions fulfilled by the comedic, though little time will be spent on the more biologicistic approaches. As will become clear, also, only one of these function will be considered in any detail; insofar as the other three arguably have some effectivity, however, they will be introduced, albeit more briefly.

First there are the biologicistic approaches. There is clearly something to be learnt from studies of, say, group behaviour of animals and the ways in which this is related to facial expressions resembling smiles or laughter. Lorenz and Eibl-Eibesfeldt have carried out work on 'pack' behaviour in other animals and believe that 'laughter' can serve cohesive and aggressive purposes within a group. Andrew and Ludovici have done work on teeth-baring and other facial expressions in 'primitive animals' and primates to try to establish a link with 'patterns of dominance'. For others, laughter and humour are in some way products of evolution; the laugh's message is: "I recognise that the danger is not real."<sup>94</sup>

This approach can then be linked to the possible physical benefits of laughter: the benefits claimed for laughter have in the past included:

"... restoring homeostasis, stabilizing blood pressure, oxygenating the blood, massaging vital organs, stimulating circulation, facilitating digestion ..."<sup>95</sup>

Whilst some of these avenues might well be worth investigating, and while biologicistic determinants must have some part to play in laughter and the comedic, this would constitute too great a digression at this point.

Secondly we have the postulation of 'innocent' comedy or 'play' which produces playful, non-aggressive laughter. This mode of comedicity is developed in the work of Richard Boston and Max Eastman among others, and is in part a reaction against Freud's insistence on the aggressive nature of all humour ("harmless jokes are not funny"). Thus for Boston laughter fulfils a dual function: playful/pleasurable as well as aggressive/socially corrective. These writers imply that this particular (playful) mode of the comedic has no social function. Now whether this socially innocent mode exists or not is not a question to be pursued here (though in view of what will be said about 'absurd' humour, examples from Monty Python will have to be considered); it is arguable that this mode does coexist with other mode(s) even in one comedic element. What it is important to avoid, however, is naive obliviousness to the unconscious or to the ideological, evident for instance in Eastman's description of naive laughter at 'deformity'; in discussing deliberate distortion of words (Milt Gross), Eastman ignores the ideological function of use/misuse of language/spelling/convention. His mirth over misspellings such as "tords" and "snaick" is based on an unacknowledged position of superiority<sup>96</sup> with respect to cultural capital, to class. And when Boston and Eastman do recognize the socially corrective function, they entirely depoliticize it:

"It is the fact that comic laughter as such is not corrective work but aimless play that makes laughter which is corrective such a tireless weapon and a cleansing broom."<sup>97</sup>

The third and rather more important function for our purposes is the 'conflict function'. Comedy operating in this mode functions as a genuine critique:

"Humour is the pin that punctures balloons of pomposity and pretentiousness."<sup>98</sup>

"Getting people to laugh at those in a position of power does, to a certain extent, undermine their authority. Laughter has the effect of 'desanctifying' them and the institutions they represent, and this is half way to getting people to actually attack them."<sup>99</sup>

There are also more romantic formulations of the oppositional impulse:

"Que l'humour soit une révolte, il suffit pour s'en convaincre d'examiner la liste des emprisonnements et des condamnations dont il a été le grand responsable. L'humour a ses héros, ses martyrs. Il est un refus. Il peut devenir un cri."<sup>100</sup>

The comedian will then find (him)self "on the side of the revolutionaries."<sup>100</sup> The usual time-honoured tools for oppositional comedy/humour are caricature, satire and irony, and some writers, notably Richard Boston, ascribe a subversive function to the Fool or Trickster who breaks down conventional barriers such as wisdom/folly, rule/disorder. At this level of generality perhaps as good as any is Allan Rodway's definition:

"Comedy can be thought of as a particular mode - at least slightly genial - of mocking propaganda for or against some desiderated norm."<sup>102</sup>

There have been and are many instances of undoubtedly conflictual comedy/humour, effectively kicking against some well-chosen target. It is broadly true that

"At times of conflict, humour serves to express agreement and to strengthen the morale of those who are present and to

undermine the morale of those against which it is aimed."<sup>103</sup>

It should however be evident that a great many examples of putatively oppositional humour do not fulfil a conflict function. It is not enough for the film-maker(s) to wish to make a critical film, it is not enough for the working class to be represented on screen, it is not enough to accept the widespread abuse of the term 'satire'.

If the definition furnished by Chris Wilson

"... use of ridicule ... in speech or writing for the ostensible purpose of exposing and discouraging vice and folly ... Add the qualification that, in a pluralistic society, 'vice' and 'folly' are defined by the joker. Satire is ridicule of behaviour or attitudes of which the joker disapproves."<sup>104</sup>

appears to be fairly broad, a more nuanced range of possibilities is provided by Max Eastman, who identifies four forms of satire, with varying degrees of bite:

- a) an attack which is so broad and heavy-handed that anyone feeling attacked clearly lacks a sense of humour (Eastman's example is of someone named Smith taking offence at a "Smith-rolling machine").
- b) a playful attack which also entertains the 'victim'.
- c) a still "kidding" attack, but with "a bottom of fury to (his) fun"
- d) not kidding at all; outright attack.<sup>105</sup>

Considering this 'spectrum', Eastman's notion of "good satire" is a little odd; it does not involve attack at all, but treats the butt of the satire with contempt, destroying it by not taking it seriously. While this is offered by Eastman as the most effective form of satire, Wilson's very similar formulation seeks to define the very nature of satire:

"Satire, in contrast, seems entirely unflattering. The joker abuses his victim, then presents him as laughable or absurd - beneath the bother of serious contempt. Satire would seem a potent tool of abuse, being simultaneously disparaging and dismissive."<sup>106</sup>

Whilst many films may at moments contain conflictual/ oppositional elements, many of these are in any case 'recuperated' and also fulfil a quite other function. One way in which a potentially critical or conflictual element can be compromised is when one individual (or relatively few individuals) is satirised, mocked or derided as a representative of a class, institution or system, and the structures responsible for the object of attack are left uncriticised. This has been true in a large number of films (this does not only refer to 'comedies') in which the presence of star protagonists and narrative structure prevent an adequate reflection on the issues involved. I have argued elsewhere, for example, (cf. footnote 1 of the introduction above) that in the Boulting brothers' I'm All Right Jack the caricatures of corrupt management are thus compromised. The wit of the script, recognition of well-loved actors playing the villains, and the quality of the playing itself conspire to conceal the absence of any potentially trenchant critique of management manipulation of industrial relations. A loophole is left for the argument that the caricatured, ludicrous and/or condemned figures are exceptions, and such films lose much of their critical bite.

Though it may be that the 'conflict function' has been accorded relatively little space here, some further considerations of its potential will punctuate the next subsection.

Finally, then, let us turn to the 'control function'. Though Gerald Mast<sup>107</sup> has identified a development from a 19th century identification of "society" with "nature" (incidentally a significant determinant in Bergson's 'Le Rire') to a 20th century tendency

towards polarization of these two categories accompanied by the emergence of the anti-hero and a more critical climate, it is still true to say that the vast bulk of comedy, as of all cultural product, functions to reinforce existing structures.

There are a number of mechanisms (which will not be considered in any detail here) by which, as numerous writers in the cultural field have suggested, filmic representations function to produce/reproduce certain subject-positions, to reinforce the individual viewer's relation to a set of dominant ideologies. Thus the use of establishing shots, shot-reverse-shot sequences, together with conventions such as "not crossing the line" etc. serve to construct a believably coherent (though illusory) space. Through narrative enigma and various forms of 'punctuation' (dissolves signalling flashback, fades implying ellipsis, cutting on action enabling subtle mini-ellipses) an artificial but, again, believable sense of time is produced. The setting-up and resolution of narrative enigmas themselves involve a relation to knowledge which tends to keep the spectator in a position of dependency.

"The whole process is directed towards the place of a reader: in order that it should be intelligible, the reader has to adopt a certain position with regard to the text. This position is that of homogeneity, of truth."<sup>108</sup>

There is an interplay of 'looks' between film protagonists and, perhaps more importantly, between spectator and protagonist (shot-reverse-shot figures also play a part here), which tends to bind the spectator into either a fetishistic or identification-orientated (but in any case voyeuristic) relation to the image. Conducive to this operation in particular are the usual viewing conditions in a cinema: a degree of solitude, darkness, a relatively large screen,

all in some ways reminiscent of dream.

"... formal questions become politically crucial, because ways of seeing are not natural and given, but bear a close relationship to ideology."<sup>109</sup>

The 'impression of reality' thus created allows covert passage to other (non-cinematic) ideologies: those of family, religion, 'law and order' race etc. A good summary of the process is furnished by Michel Marie:

"... L'effet de réalité (c'est à dire la production de l'impression de réalité) a pour fonction idéologique de refouler le travail producteur du film, de reproduire le monde vague, informulé, non théorisé, impensé, de l'idéologie dominante, et par cette même opération d'imposer des représentations idéologiques qui se donnent pour 'naturelles'. Le cinéma est donc caractérisé doublement comme reproducteur d'idéologies pré-existantes, et comme producteur d'une idéologie spécifique, la fameuse 'impression de réalité', fondée sur la transparence illusoire qui, en niant l'écran, redouble l'évidence du vraisemblable et donc contribue à renforcer l'idéologie reflétée."<sup>110</sup>

What are at stake here are the mechanisms by which comedy can also be instrumental in reinforcing readings consistent with a dominant ideology. The literature available on this subject is generally untouched by any materialist conception of society, and use of that literature has therefore involved reading it across a materialist perspective. In what follows, formulations are avoided which use too vague a vocabulary and which appear oblivious to class analysis,<sup>111</sup> and quotes are used insofar as the insights are compatible with a materialist analysis, or can be appropriated and reworked. The work of Greig, Duncan, Eastman and Nicolson in particular is either scornful or silent in relation to notions of differential readings of comedy based on the social position of the



spectator. When Eastman quotes J.N. Ding's version of the "Shavian metaphor",

"The cartoon ... is a sort of humour-coated capsule, by means of which the sober judgements of editorial minds may surreptitiously be gotten down the throats of an apathetic public. In other words ... the apple sauce in which political pills are immersed and fed to unwilling children."<sup>112</sup>

he sees this in very simplistic, manipulatory terms, and denies that it is applicable in any but the most blatant cases of political propaganda.

The social function of comedy has been identified at least in passing by many writers, among them Bergson, Klapp, Palmer, Boston. Writing from a position well within the cultural establishment, Allan Rodway has written

"Every culture is engaged in a perpetual defence of its established values."<sup>113</sup>

and H. Dalziel Duncan thus:

"Wise authorities understand well the conservative function of comedy. Saturnalia, Mediaeval Lords and Abbots misrule, real and symbolic killing of mock kings, indicate clearly that comedy has long been used to uphold ... authority."<sup>114</sup>

"It seems clear that joking is a powerful conservative. Its effects reinforce existing ideology, power, status, morality, norms and values within a society ... Through its pleasures and personal utility, humour recruits and bribes us to become laughing conservatives ... Freed from ignorance, inhibitions, fear and prejudice, the super-psyche would have no use for humour. You will recognize a Utopia by the complete absence of humour; you will spot superman by his unmitigated, infuriating seriousness."<sup>115</sup>

Also relevant here are the notions of carnival discussed above, and rule-breaking in the area of language, literary and cinematic convention as discussed below (pg.118 ff.).

"We have a compulsion to be moral and decent, but we also resent the obligation we have accepted. The irreverence of the carnival disburdens us of our resentment and purges our ambivalence so that we can return to our duties as honest men ... comedy cures folly by folly."<sup>116</sup>

There are (at least) four ways in which comedy can fulfil a social-control function.

#### Corrective function

Laughter at aberrant behaviour or at some form of unsociability can have a corrective function, but comparison between this century and the last is apposite here. Whilst other forms of social control through comedy are arguably as common as ever, the crudely corrective function has largely lost its force except in smaller groups -here we are concerned with a more general conception of society/ideology. It is probably significant that the main author who uses 'corrective' terminology is Henri Bergson, with one foot firmly in the 19th century. For Bergson,

"Laughter would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."<sup>117</sup>

#### Defusing/evading of conflict

Eric Midwinter describes the soothing role of comedy:

"By grinning at man's condition, by softening the edges of his aggressive efforts to have wrongs righted, by channeling his energies into the mill-race of laughter, by keeping his pecker up, comedians may have helped resist the correction of legitimate grievances ... it could be argued that they help preserve the status quo, the unrocked boat and the stability of the social fabric."<sup>118</sup>

He also makes this observation in relation to the 'safety-valve' function:

"Comedians stay within the restraints of the State and its generally accepted norms; they rail a little at its institutions - its Government, matrimonial units, workspaces, police, even its royalty, but it is an affectionate sniping, and of menace to those institutions there is none. In fact,

it may be that they are strengthened by their show of sporting good fellowship in graciously allowing themselves to be used as butts."<sup>119</sup>

The conflict-function served by much so-called 'satire' is thus minimised, indeed turned to the particular Establishment's advantage. An efficient form of satire, as we have seen, is that described by Max Eastman:

"Good satire ... is not an attack at all. It denies the victim that honour ... it destroys him without attack, without taking him seriously, as a plaything, a toy, a thing but for the pure fun of destruction hardly worth destroying."<sup>120</sup>

Richard Boston,<sup>121</sup> following Freud, points out that humour relating to particular topics (for example mother-in-law jokes, racist jokes) is observed and enjoyed in situations where there is a degree of tension about that subject, so that the joke/humour can function as a safety-valve.

"Topics which are capable of evoking a humorous reaction in an individual seem frequently 'loaded' for that individual with an unpleasant emotional effect."<sup>122</sup>

This kind of consideration is likely to be of limited interest in our context, since the Monty Python films enjoy a relatively aetiolated relation to everyday life and topical issues, though we shall have cause to look at the role of anxiety about anality, sexuality, violence etc. in appreciation of this kind of comedycity.

One device which helps to defuse any possible conflictual situation or relation is trivialisation, often of entire issues. For Gerald Mast,

"If the subject-matter is not intrinsically trivial, a comedy reduces important subject-matter to the trivial."<sup>123</sup>

The spectator/audience can consequently forget the gravity of the

underlying issues. In a rather different context, Franz Schoenberger wrote that

"An acute sense of the comical ... sometimes works like a narcotic, because one usually forgets that a situation can be at the same time highly humorous and terribly dangerous."<sup>124</sup>

Schoenberger was referring to the gallows-humour of concentration-camp victims, but surely the principle applies to any arguably 'serious' situation, for instance one in which the audience watches the vomiting sequence in Meaning of Life and forgets the discrepancies between eating habits in different parts of the world.

Such a defusing of potential conflict can be seen as an evasion:

"... the comedian can evade the conflict, relieving the stress between competing ideals by laughter."<sup>125</sup>

The function of such an evasion of conflict (be it thought of at the level of textual operations or of authorship) is predominantly conservative, though it has to be noted that trivialisation has been claimed also as a potentially oppositional/subversive tactic in the comedy of minority/oppressed groups. Raymond Durnat's comment in 1964 could have been applied to any number of comedies:

"... this neutrality often implies obscurantism and complaisance. The themes aroused are often such as to demand a decision one way or the other; in those cases, to sit on the fence is a failure to tackle the theme properly. Often it is an answer."<sup>126</sup> (original emphasis)

#### Role of the 'comic fool'.

In 'The Fool as a Social Type' Orrin Klapp conveniently summarises the role of the 'fool'.

"The fool is a social type having certain definable roles and a special status and function in group life. Fools represent departures from group norms of propriety which are sub-

ject to the sanction of ridicule. Fool-making is a continuous social process and operates to enforce propriety and to adjust status."<sup>127</sup>

This formulation, with its "sanction of ridicule" and "enforce" is perhaps rather mechanistic and ahistorical, a throwback to the 'corrective' function mentioned above. More flexible is Laura Makarius' version:

"One of the functions of these rule-breakers is as a safety-valve in societies where the basic rules are over-rigid."<sup>128</sup>

In any case it is clear that the social function of the fool or clown involves some form of control or regulation. The scapegoat aspect of the fool/clown has been discussed by Wylie Sypher; he traces the role of the scapegoat back to biblical and pre-Socratic phallic rituals, and relates the comic hero's role to that of the "alazon", the "antagonist and profaner" who must be sacrificed to make good the violence done to the god/king.

"The impostor profanes the rites; then he is beaten and driven out."<sup>129</sup>

This "sacrifice" corresponds also to the sacrifice of the son in the "reverse-Oedipus" thesis first developed by Ludwig Jekel<sup>130</sup> and taken up by Martin Grotjahn:

"The thesis is simple ... (in comedy) the tragic guilt of the son is displaced upon the father ... it is the father who is guilty."<sup>131</sup>

These models are most attractive in dealing with films in which a central figure functions as fool or scapegoat. In view of the frequently fragmented nature of the Monty Python films, examples are likely to be more transitory and the notion of the Monty Python team themselves (as performers, as authors) as "son" may be more productive, with establishment referents such as the Church, the Festival of Light, and diegetic coherence in the role of the father, the Law. In Grotjahn's scenario, the establishment (Law) would then educate/

manipulate the Son, who would refuse. The aggression of the Father would then be quelled, and the Son sacrificed ...

A more readily apparent mechanism is that coinciding with the 'superiority thesis' developed by Plato and Aristotle, then by Hobbes:

"The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others."<sup>132</sup>

The laughter of conscious superiority is less easy to identify in our society (we no longer go to laugh at the lunatics for our entertainment), but this is not to say that a sense of superiority plays no part:

"Pleasure in the comic arises from a more or less conscious comparison between the onlooker's perfection and the other person's obvious imperfection."<sup>133</sup>

The laughter of superiority clearly has an important part to play in the Monty Python films, though less so in the stronger narratives (Life of Brian, Monty Python and the Holy Grail) than in the earlier And Now for Something Completely Different or in the TV programmes.

"We use police and army a lot ... If you want to make a fool of anyone it is obviously much better if he is a cabinet minister, merchant banker, a clergyman, a policeman or an army officer rather than a plumber or a plasterer's mate."<sup>134</sup>

Finally, the innocent fool or simpleton can also (and simultaneously) function as an identification-figure. The simpletons in the Monty Python films seem to function more in this way than as butts. St. John Chrysostom defined the fool as "he who gets slapped",<sup>135</sup> and the vocabulary of physical chastisement is taken up by Enid Welsford:

"The fool is now no longer a mere safety-valve for the suppressed instincts of the bully; he provides a subtler balm for the fears and wounds of those afflicted with the inferiority complex."<sup>136</sup>

Leaving aside the unidentified source of this "inferiority complex" (social or individual for Welsford? - one suspects that for her it is entirely a matter of individual psychology), Welsford pinpoints our tendency to identify with "the buffeted simpleton". And she does put her finger on the nature of the ideological 'work' performed by such an identification-effect:

"How comforting then to be persuaded that the blows are always harmless, that the victim is never hurt."<sup>137</sup>

When children play with toy machine-guns, they 'learn' that if you shoot someone, he/she is not really dead. This kind of message is particularly efficiently conveyed in films and television, media with peculiarly effective means of achieving a 'reality-effect' which then articulates a number of (predominantly dominant) ideologies, by mechanisms which will be discussed later.

#### Group reinforcement of established/conventional values.

Richard Stephenson furnishes a succinct reference to

"... control mechanisms expressing the common value systems and minimising the notion of class conflict and consciousness."<sup>138</sup>

Gerald Mast, attempting to define some types of comic films, identifies the non-confrontation of the mores of the status-quo as a feature common to much comedy. In such films, value systems are based on crude assumptions and hackneyed clichés.<sup>139</sup>

The argument about whether or not laughter is fundamentally a group phenomenon can be left to one side here; Bergson's view that

laughter needs an echo/support from "other intelligences" is clearly quite different from Freud's emphasis on the individual's psychic energy. What is relevant is that laughter can and does possess a group dimension:

"It is the business of laughter to repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity to plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole."<sup>140</sup>

This may be called the integrationist function of laughter.

Some experimental work has been done on the comparative responses to comic stimuli of individuals on their own and in group situations. R.E. Perl<sup>141</sup> found that group 'viewings' of verbal jokes produced higher 'funniness' ratings than individual perusal of comparable jokes. Perl identified three causes which may contribute to this: the larger number of stimuli encouraging laughter (for example the sight and sound of others laughing), the release of common restrained impulses, and the feeling of moral sanction for their release.

What this stems from is the fact that the reflexive/analytic mode is harder to sustain in a group situation. The 'joke-effect' or humorousness of a particular comedic element depends precisely on the rules/codes structuring that element remaining implicit; if the mechanism of the joke or comedic element is made explicit then it is no longer 'funny'. The way in which these rules or codes operate has been analysed at length by (among others) Arthur Koestler in a rather abstract way, and Freud was also very aware of the effect of the reflexive mode upon comedicity.



The integrationist mode of comedy depends on the consensus sharing of values, notions of 'normality' as entertained within a group. Any such consensus or sense of normality is itself constructed by the didactics of ideological representation, which includes press and other media, social relations with peer - and other groups, in fact all experience as lived through the imaginary relation;<sup>142</sup> and this includes, of course, films, which are generally experienced under conditions highly conducive to the unconscious work of ideology. The consensus which may operate in a particular audience are then likely to produce aggressive responses to 'otherness', to intruders or outsiders; this aggression may well explode as laughter.

This characteristic of the choral audience has been noted by a number of writers. Thus Wylie Sypher:

"One of the strongest impulses comedy can discharge from the depths of the social self is our hatred of the 'alien', especially when the stranger who is 'different' stirs any unconscious doubts about our own beliefs ... in this role the comic artist is a conservative or even a reactionary who protects our self-esteem ... to this extent the comic response is tribal, and if it is malicious, uncivilized. Any majority secretes venom against those who trouble it, then works off this venom in mocking some figure."<sup>143</sup>

"... two elements in the public's humour: delight in suffering, contempt for the unfamiliar."<sup>144</sup>

Writing of Sully's view of the infectiousness of choral humour, Harold Nicolson has observed that

"He implies that when individual laughter becomes choral it tends to revert to primal laughter and he confesses that he has found it difficult to recognize in an English music-hall audience any distinct traces of a deposit from the advance of the culture-stream."<sup>145</sup>

Once again, this corresponds to the conservative function of

laughter in preserving the status quo, resisting innovation.

Nicolson himself proposes:

"We shall find that English humour ... functions most frequently as a defence mechanism ... against the incursion of disturbing thoughts and feelings."<sup>146</sup>

Whilst I would not care to subscribe to Nicolson's very idealist/ahistorical notion of "Englishness", he is correct in thus identifying one of the key roles of comedy/humour, be it specifically English (for complex reasons not on Nicolson's agenda) or of a more general nature. The phenomenon had been remarked on some three and a half centuries earlier, by Sir John Harington:

"... we shall observe that the joys we enjoy in this world consist rather 'in indolentia' (as they call it) which is an avoiding of grievances and inconveniences, than in possessing any passing great pleasures."<sup>147</sup>

One way in which such 'excluding' group humour might, in a more restricted context, be oppositional, is when it is directed against absent authority-figures. In some research on psychiatric hospital staff-meetings, for example, Coser<sup>148</sup> found significant levels of humour directed at absent superiors. Again, however, the productivity of such 'subversion' can be questioned:

"If the consensual dissent expressed in group laughter does not lead to serious and concerted action ... the humour will be ineffective, or even counterproductive, in influencing the authority it jokingly attacks."<sup>149</sup>

Certainly the incidence of 'upward'-directed derisive group humour to be found among schoolchildren (in relation to teachers), soldiers (in relation to officers) or workers (in relation to management) can be seen in these terms.

"Private ridicule would seem to act as a safety-valve - diffusing and defusing those social tensions it expresses. The humour would relieve recurrent frictions without reducing their likelihood - conservatively preserving the system it attacks."<sup>150</sup>

It is likely that in any one instance of comedy or humour the conflict and control functions coexist.

"Comedy is both hatred and revel, rebellion and defence, attack and escape."<sup>151</sup>

"A joke is thus a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once."<sup>152</sup>

More importantly, however, it would appear that the control function more often than not predominates, and frequently when some aspect of the Establishment or the system seems to be under attack. Enid Welsford describes very well the popularity of 'social outcast' 'comic figures':

"(These characters) spend their time offending against the social code, behaving as useless ... members of society. But the loud applause which greets their delinquencies is no sign that their devotees have a grudge against the social order."<sup>153</sup>

It would obviously be far too simplistic to see the Monty Python films either as revolutionary surrealism or as devious reactionary opium.

"... judgements as to the 'progressiveness' of this or that comedy, or, indeed, of this or that joke or gag, abstracted from the narrative process and its institutional context, need to be made with care."<sup>154</sup>

Even the relatively crude question of 'gratuitous offence' (deliberate references to Jewishness/Arabs, use of genital expletives) cannot be reduced to glib formulae. Again a precise knowledge of the reception context is essential. What will concern us at a later stage will be how particular (grotesque and scatological) comedic elements work in determinate contexts, and whether their functions are to be associated predominantly with social control or with promotion of conflict or criticism.

(ii) Psychogenesis and psychological functions.

We shall here concentrate primarily on the sections of Freud's work which deal with psychic economy. A discussion of his suggested structures (three-person, two-person) for jokes and for the 'comic' will be left until the later subsection concerned specifically with obscene/excremental humour.

"We derive pleasure from both binding and releasing, dominating and being dominated, expending and economising, knowing and not knowing, equivalencing and differencing, articulating and identifying, ... according to a certain economy."<sup>156</sup>  
(original emphasis)

What are striking in a (retroactive) reading of this are the resonances set up with, for example, Bourdieu's vocabulary of the economy of language and culture.

The next step for Freud was to categorise jokes (heuristically as later became evident) as either 'innocent' or 'tendentious'. The tendentious jokes in turn could then be said either to give satisfaction by cleverly evading some external (often social or political) obstacle, or by evading an internal impulse which opposes the joke's tendentious purpose. For Freud the former type is relatively trivial:

"It may nevertheless strike us that, however much these and analogous jokes of a tendentious nature may satisfy us, they are not able to provoke much laughter."<sup>157</sup>

and he asserts the likelihood that

"... the removal of an internal obstacle may make an incomparably higher contribution to the pleasure."<sup>158</sup>

It seems that Freud's next conclusion, unremarkable though it may seem now, was due to a crudely empirical, even intuitive observation regarding the 'funniness' of these two 'types' of joke.

"... since we know that in both cases of the use of tendentious jokes pleasure is obtained, it is therefore plausible to suppose that this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved."<sup>159</sup>

We are now accustomed to the importance of unconscious processes such as repression; but Freud's own development of these concepts is here a curious mixture of rigour and unwarranted assumption.

Having 'established' this relation between pleasure and psychic economy, Freud returns to 'innocent' jokes to try to elucidate the ways in which laughter might represent a release of economised energy. He first identifies the pleasure of word-plays and puns (examples of the joke-technique of multiple use of the same material)<sup>160</sup> as based on acoustic similarities, a pleasure which originates in the child-like habit of "treating words like things". The most straightforward examples of such jokes are 'bad' jokes, jokes relying for their effect on 'gratuitous' connections which are not worked into the 'text' of the joke. However, Freud recognizes that

"This rediscovery of what is familiar is pleasurable, and once more it is not difficult for us to recognize this pleasure as a pleasure in economy and to relate it to economy in psychical expenditure."<sup>161</sup>

As we have noted above, this is a particularly common source of pleasure, but Freud points out one interesting area of recognition, that of topicality. Clearly jokes rely heavily on context and topical references for their success: jokes about politicians and other media personalities tend (especially in this age of post-mechanical reproduction) to have very short active lives.

"The need which men feel for deriving pleasure from their processes of thought is therefore constantly creating new jokes based on the new interests of the day."<sup>162</sup>

These observations are astute enough but they incidentally prefigure

the problems of sustaining the distinction on which Freud insists between jokes and 'the comic'. The pleasure of repetition/recognition is complexly common to both.

The third form of pleasure in these jokes is what Freud calls "pleasure in nonsense". For the time being he does not go into the details of the childhood origins of this pleasure, but for him nonsense was no part of 'serious life'. The 'nonsense' component in jokes is an attempt at escape from the strictures of rationality, of logic, of criticism of absent-minded childishness, and to return to a presymbolic order where 'logical' criteria do not apply. This formulation of this impulse can profitably be compared with the Sypher quote on page 95 above.

"... the rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality is deep-going and long-lasting. Even the phenomena of imaginative activity must be included in this (rebellious) category."<sup>163</sup>

There is a stimulating parallel to be drawn here with the 'inversion of law' of carnivalesque happenings. We must remember, however, that any such comparison must take account of the specific conjuncture. 'Law' and 'logic', like Oedipus and the modalities of repression, are not absolute categories but are socially and ideologically constructed at particular historical moments. We may wonder for example, whether the absurdity of Monty Python can be described as 'carnivalesque', and what significance this may have in a contemporary context.

An important aspect of the comedic, which Freud discusses because of its similarity to joke-techniques but which is likely to be of more value to us because of the frequently surreal/absurd

aspects of Monty Python films, is its close similarity to the dream-work.<sup>164</sup> In a manner analogous to that used in dreams, material which is threatening or sensitive and hence liable to repression is broken down into suitable components, the relevant psychic 'load' displaced onto new elements appropriate for a joke, and the new elements recombined/condensed into a joke-form which allows the psychic energy (anxiety, fear, anger) associated with the original material to be mobilized. Since the energy cannot be articulated directly, it 'explodes' as a comic response, as laughter. Thus we can see the sense of Freud's prioritisation of 'internal' obstacles. He formulates the above procedure in this way:

"Let us decide ... to adopt the hypothesis that this is the way in which jokes are formed in the first person; a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome of this is at once grasped by conscious perception."<sup>165</sup>

Like the dream-work, the formation and recollection of jokes are thus involuntary and subject to the vagaries of 'association':

"Often they are not at the disposal of our memory when we want them; but at other times, to make up for this, they appear involuntarily, as it were ..."<sup>166</sup>

These structural similarities are convincing and instructive. They are strengthened by another similarity, pointed out by Freud, in relation to the pleasure-seeking preference accorded to recognition and to the above-mentioned topicality:

"In the formation of dreams, too, we come across a special preference for what is recent and we cannot escape a suspicion that association with what is recent is rewarded, and so facilitated, by a peculiar bonus of pleasure."<sup>167</sup>

These similarities and parallels are instructive. Yet the differences are equally instructive. A dream is a relatively asocial mental product which needs to remain uncomprehended if it is to fulfil its purpose. A joke, on the other hand, is

"... the most social of all social functions that aim at a yield of pleasure ... a condition of intelligibility is, therefore, binding on it."<sup>168</sup>

Though one may question how Freud can assert "most social", it is true that a joke needs to be comprehensible in order to be effective whilst a dream's effectivity is dependent on its inscrutability (and its forgetability). This is why

"All ... methods of displacement appear too as techniques of joking. But when they appear, they usually respect the limits imposed on their enjoyment in conscious thinking."<sup>169</sup>

By contrast, the dream-work has other requirements:

"Under the pressure of the censorship, any sort of connection is good enough to serve as a substitute by allusion, and displacement is allowed from any element to any other."<sup>170</sup>

This brings us back to the absurd and to the more intellectual "surreal". One reason why nonsense/absurdity causes problems for Freud is probably that not only can the absurdity be (as he correctly notes) an unconscious desire to return to pre-rational pleasures; absurdity can also be deliberately cultivated, 'consciously' created. The technique of the dream-work (more or less arbitrary substitutes for displacement) is employed for comedic purposes, for 'surreal' humour. This kind of comedicity, the world of "I've got a ferret sticking up my nose", of flying sheep, of violent diegetic fragmentation, of potential disorientation, is the stuff of Monty Python. The deformation and play with dream- and joke-structures can take on the appearance of deconstruction, of the creation of 'alienation' in the spectator. This will concern us again when we look at our film(s) in more detail, and also when we consider how the class/cultural-capital positioning of an audience disposes it towards such comedic modes.



In a section entitled 'The Psychogenesis of Jokes', Freud identifies three possible stages in the production of a joke. The stage of 'play' corresponds to the child-like pleasure in repetition, in recognition of the familiar; the 'jest' represents a preliminary stage of the joke in which the 'techniques' of jokes are mobilized but there is not yet a 'serious purpose', the pleasure is not yet anchored to a particular repressed anxiety; finally the joke proper is invested with 'value' the function of which is to mobilize the psychic energy associated with the repressed material.

"If what a jest says possesses substance and value, it turns into a joke."<sup>171</sup>

At this point in Freud's disquisition it becomes clear that if he wishes to retain his overall model of joke-technique and its relation to the unconscious, the earlier distinction between 'innocent' and 'tendentious' jokes becomes untenable. Freud himself recognizes this:

"Even though we have earlier asserted that such jokes are to be described as innocent and not yet tendentious, we must not forget that strictly-speaking only jests are non-tendentious - that is, serve solely the aim of producing pleasure. Jokes, even if the thought contained in them is non-tendentious and thus only serves theoretical intellectual interests, are in fact never non-tendentious."<sup>172</sup>

This is a view around which writers on comedy have tended to polarize, either implicitly or with explicit statements of agreement or rejection. Psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn is inclined to agree:

"The sophisticated reader will note aggressive trends in every witticism."<sup>173</sup>

Humorous writer Max Eastman is more inclined to scoff. Though at some points (as we shall see) his insights do coincide with Freud's, Eastman's pronouncements on this issue make surprising reading. Couched in a barely disguised hostility to the idea of an unconscious, to psychoanalysis, and apparently to any 'serious' approach

to the comedic, are a reference to Walt Disney ("he seemed an appropriate commentator") to lend support to his opposition to Freud, and the following line:

"Sex-jokes are easy to make, and no special theory is needed to explain them."<sup>174</sup>

To return to Freud. At this point he is able to specify more clearly the function of so-called tendentious jokes.

"We are now able to state the formula for the mode of operation of tendentious jokes. They put themselves at the service of purposes in order that, by means of using the pleasure from jokes as a fore-pleasure, they may produce new pleasure by lifting suppressions and repressions."<sup>175</sup>

The notion of 'fore-pleasure' is an important one which is very elegantly used in a slightly different context by Terry Eagleton. In conducting a (rather playful) microanalysis of one line of poetry, he writes

"Whether (this line) can cajole me into laying down my ideology, so to speak, is ... a matter of whether it can corner for its own ends some of the unconscious energy I invest in my 'beliefs', while reassuring me that I have no need to feel guilty or anxious about this ... or that it is worth trading that quantity of guilt or anxiety for the libidinal gratification it will afford me."<sup>176</sup>

The gratification offered by the line would be

"... a kind of 'fore-pleasure' which tries to seduce me into admiring its fantasies ..."<sup>177</sup>

The reader of (theoretically any) text might thus be 'seduced' by in this case semiotic/libidinal gratifications, irrespective of the manifest content of the text - hence the possibility of 'liking' texts which one may disapprove of or disagree with. This is very close to the ways in which Freud formulates the forepleasure function of the joke-technique:

"(The joke) will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation ... This is brought out with perfect aptitude

in the common phrase 'die Lächer auf seine Seite ziehen' (to bring laughers over to your side)."<sup>178</sup>

"We are inclined to give the thought the benefit of what has pleased us in the form of the joke, and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure."<sup>179</sup> (original emphasis)

If anything, he seems to overestimate the power of jokes to seduce the receiver into 'accepting' an alien message.

"... it shatters respect for institutions and truths in which the hearer has believed ..."<sup>180</sup>

Apart from the phenomenon which we noted in Eric Midwinter's quote above (pg.96) regarding the resilience of establishment institutions regarding criticism, it is surely simply misguided to assert that jokes can radically change opinions. Rather are they likely to function as reinforcement for already-held opinions, or as a gradual wearing down and modification. The issue is always complicated by the intrusion upon the joke-scene of the 'intellectual play' factor also discussed above. The pleasure of recognizing a 'clever', unusual or ingenious joke-form carries a kick of superiority, of satisfaction, which can be hard to admit to if the manifest content of the joke is obnoxious/unacceptable. Though the move from jokes to a wider comedic ambit is not itself without problems, this promises to be an interesting question in relation to much Monty Python material, in which blatantly 'sexist' images, flirting with racism, and what many critics have called 'bad taste' are all complicated by the (possible) enjoyment of 'clever' comedy.

In discussing the origins of 'the comic' as opposed to jokes, Freud develops the notion of a preconscious 'comparison' mechanism:

"It will only become easy for us ... to throw light on the contradiction to the definition of the comic if we suppose that the origin of comic pleasure lies in a comparison of

the difference between two expenditures. Comic pleasure and the effect by which it is known - laughter - can only come about if this difference is utilizable and capable of discharge."<sup>181</sup>

The origins of this urge to compare are again to be found in childhood. Freud recognizes the impulse to superiority, to mockery, which he asserts is present in children in a 'pure' state, and is then modified, diluted, inhibited during the education process, so that in adults the impulse is effectively repressed.

"The use of moderation and restraint, even in the case of permitted impulses, is a late fruit of education and is acquired by the mutual inhibition of mental activities brought together in a combination. Where such combinations are weakened, as in the unconscious of dreams or in the mono-ideism of psychoneuroses, the child's lack of moderation re-emerges."<sup>182</sup>

While the disguised 'comic' laughter is a liberation of aggressive or mocking impulses mediated by a preconscious comparison with a childhood state, children themselves, for Freud, do not 'need' the comic (or, for that matter, jokes or humour):

"We may infer that the comic feeling is not present in a child's superior laughter. It is a laughter of pure pleasure."<sup>183</sup>

"If one might generalize, it would seem most attractive to place the specific characteristic of the comic which we are in search of in an awakening of the infantile - to regard the comic as the regained 'lost laughter of childhood'."<sup>184</sup>

While this in itself seems a reasonable comment, the precise mechanism by which the comparison with childhood is made is somewhat vague and unsatisfying, considering the comparative rigour of the preceding work on jokes. Freud is driven to use a model which indicates a considerable gap in his own grasp of the idea of the unconscious: for him comic feeling is necessarily derived

"... from a difference in expenditure that arises in the course of understanding another person."<sup>185</sup>

At another point he admits the tentative nature of his findings:

"I am unable to decide whether degradation to being a child is only a special case of comic degradation, or whether everything comic is based fundamentally on degradation to being a child."<sup>186</sup>

As another semi-digression we can note Max Eastman's response to this kind of approach and to the analytic mode in general:

"I suspect them (such theorists) not only of never having seen a baby, but of never having been one."<sup>187</sup>

His response to Piddington's thesis that "every ludicrous situation involves two conflicting evaluations in the social order" (an 'incongruity' theory) is that "Mr. Piddington most assuredly never saw a baby."<sup>188</sup> It is worth reproducing a paraphrase of Eastman's four "laws" concerning humour.

- a) Things can be funny only when we are 'in fun', at least partly.
- b) When we are 'in fun' a shift of values takes place so that some otherwise unpleasant things are potentially funny.
- c) Being 'in fun' is natural in childhood.
- d) 'in fun' potential is retained to varying degrees by adults.<sup>189</sup>

As a phenomenological description of how humour can be observed this will pass, but Eastman eschews any detailed theory. He is content to assert that

"A more concise, clear-cut, explicit, universally perceived and heeded state of being than that called 'only fooling' or 'in fun' does not exist."<sup>190</sup>

We are brought back, once more, to Freud, whose project is precisely to define what this 'in fun' means. His answer is by no means comprehensive, but opens up some useful avenues. Very

briefly, his discussion of the factors influencing the 'comic mood' includes<sup>191</sup>

- (i) a generally cheerful mood, including toxic states; the role of jokes and the comic in trying to sustain/attain a cheerful mood.
- (ii) Expectation of the comic, increased susceptibility to relatively low levels of stimulation. Importance of recognition and repetition.
- (iii) imaginative or intellectual work with serious aims interferes with comic pleasure, so that larger stimulus is then necessary to reappropriate cathexes for comedic use.
- (iv) self-reflexivity with respect to the comedic process (analysis of comedy) blocks release of psychic energy by this path.
- (v) comic response is blocked by the existence of strong emotion in respect to the situation or content;<sup>192</sup> the comic emerges most easily when feelings are not strongly involved.
- (vi) comic pleasure is helped by other pleasurable accompanying circumstances which act as fore-pleasure in the same way as for tendentious jokes.

It may be interesting (though no doubt difficult) to take such considerations into account when planning and carrying out audience studies in relation to Monty Python.

We seem to be unable to shake off the notion of pleasure; in one form or another it keeps returning, perhaps the ghost of the cotton-reel. If we bracket off the reservation we expressed above about Freud's oversimplification of childhood, it certainly does appear that some form of return to pre-comedic pleasure is at the heart of comedy. For Freud,

"... the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy - the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes, and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life."<sup>193</sup>

Before we go on to consider more specifically the links between social/ideological and psychoanalytic aspects of the comedic, let us look more closely at the role of the comedic in the movement from infancy<sup>194</sup> to adulthood. We shall be considering some examples of erotic/obscene humour and jokes, but a discussion of obscene-tendentious joke-structures will be left until the next subsection.

In the Lacanian order of things the entry of the infant into symbolisation is effected at the cost of subjection to Law (of the Father); the details of the trajectory involving the mirror-phase, the Oedipus complex and symbolic castration need not concern us here; suffice it to reaffirm the culture-specific nature of these processes<sup>195</sup> and their ultimate link with the economic nexus. We may then entertain the tentative thesis that a radical deconstruction of signification within the symbolic order might open up a space for a wedge to be driven in. Nor surprisingly, the possibility of the comedic fulfilling such a subversive function has occupied a number of minds. Thus Steve Neale:

"If the disordering and reordering process is such as to reiterate or renew socially established discourses, meanings, modes and structures of signification, then the laughter of the third person can be seen as resulting from the re-stabilisation of the subject. If, on the contrary, it is such as to disturb the symbolic order of the Law, then the mode of laughter is different, stemming not from the re-inscription of the Law and the re-stabilisation of the subject but instead from a rearrangement of the symbolic such as to shatter the stability of both."<sup>196</sup>

To stress that work on the level of comedic signification is essential,

"For the Law is not simply a matter of the ideological content of discourse, but of the orders of the articulation of meaning, and narration of jokes and gags would have to take different forms, which themselves oppose the orders of discourse and language characteristic of the Law, if these

jokes and gags are to achieve a re-ordering of the symbolic that is in any way radically effective."<sup>197</sup>

In endorsing the erosion of the supports of "logocentrism, idealism, theologism, the scaffolding of political and subjective economy", Rosemary Jackson articulates a manifesto which can stand for radical political work in any cultural area:

"Far from construing this attempt at erosion as a mere embrace of barbarism or of chaos, it is possible to discern it as a desire for something excluded from cultural order - more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries. As a literature of desire, the fantastic can be seen as providing a point of departure, in Bersani's words, for an authentically civilizing scepticism about the nature of our desires and the nature of our being."<sup>198</sup>

The language of desire also has a subversive function for Deleuze and Guattari:

"... men who know how to leave, to scramble the codes, to cause flows to circulate, to traverse the desert of the body without organs. They overcome a limit, they shatter a wall, the capitalist barrier. But through the impasses and triangles a schizophrenic flow moves, irresistibly; sperm, river, drainage, inflamed genital mucus, or a stream of words that do not let themselves be coded, a libido that is too fluid, too viscous; a violence against syntax, a concerted destruction of the signifier, non-sense erected as a flow, polyvocality that returns to haunt all relations ... Engels demonstrated ... how an author is great because he cannot prevent himself from tracing flows and causing them to circulate, flows that split asunder the catholic and despotic signifier of his work, and that necessarily nourish a revolutionary machine on the horizon. That is what style is, or rather the absence of style, - asyntactic, agrammatical; the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a signifying thing, but by what causes it to move, and to explode - desire."<sup>199</sup>

It has to be noted, however, that for Deleuze and Guattari this eruption of desire is more fundamental than the ('mere') transgression of Law as outlined by Neale above; the Law is itself a front, a displaced despot:



"... the law proves nothing about an original reality of desire because it essentially disfigures the desired; and the transgression proves nothing about a functional reality of the law because, far from being a mockery of the law, it is itself derisory in relation to what the law prohibits in reality."<sup>200</sup>

Nevertheless, all artistic activity has the potential for the kind of radical decoding through which desire can escape.

"Because art, as soon as it attains its own grandeur, its own genius, creates chains of decoding and deterritorialisation that serve as the foundation for desiring-machines, and make them function."<sup>201</sup>

The German poet Morgenstern is thus compared with Carroll and Lear by Philip Thomson:

"... on record as claiming that man's basically unsatisfactory relationship to his fellows, his society and world in general stems from his being imprisoned by language, which is a most unreliable, false and dangerous thing, and that one must 'smash language', destroy man's naive trust in this most familiar and unquestioned part of his life, before he can learn to think properly."<sup>202</sup>

Making language 'strange', forcing the reader to reinterpret outside the habitual sets of linguistic assumptions, can thus persuasively be seen as inherently progressive. Whether the 'inherent' potential of such a practice can be realized in particular instances is, however, another matter. The deconstructionist project is not in itself any guarantee of radical political effectivity:

"That the breaking of the imaginary relation between text and viewer is the first prerequisite of political questions in art has, I would hold, been evident since Brecht. That the breaking of the imaginary relationship can constitute a political goal in itself is the ultra-leftist fantasy of the surrealists and of much of the avante-garde work now being undertaken in the cinema."<sup>203</sup>

The inadequacy/ineffectivity of presymbolic 'revolt' is also thus suggested in a portmodernist context:

"... it's our thesis ... that the tension between somatic and  
thetic experience (between nonsense play and symbolisation)  
has already been absorbed by promotional culture in the form  
of the 'recyclage' of all forms of sign-struggles ..."204

The audience study which will form a later part of this work will be  
an attempt to assess (among other things) the ways in which absurd/  
nonsense elements in Monty Python are read by particular viewers.  
For the moment we can consider another aspect of the Pythons'  
'rule-breaking'.

The Monty Python team were certainly not "the first" to abandon  
punch-lines, to abandon sketches and overall programme formats, to  
(at least occasionally if not systematically) use nonsense and  
surrealism for comedic effect on television. The single programme  
which did on all these fronts seem to predate Monty Python, (and  
which, incidentally, merits one small paragraph in Wilmut's book  
-there must be a reason why), featured ex-goon Spike Milligan. Q5  
was broadcast in 1969 while discussions about the Monty Python  
project were in progress, and was followed in later years by Q6,  
Q7, Q8, and Q9.

"Jones: 'I remember looking at those shows and thinking,  
"Shit! he's done it!" He just totally ripped up all form  
and shape - and there we'd been writing three-minute  
sketches with beginnings, middles and ends - and Milligan  
started a sketch, and then it turned into a different  
sketch, then it turned into something else'. Certainly Mil-  
ligan had beaten the Python team to the abandonment of the  
punch-line, although his shows have an improvised feel to  
them and he frequently terminates a sketch he has had enough  
of by walking off the set muttering 'Did I write this?'"205

The 'Q' series would merit more extended consideration itself, but  
one interesting question is why it did not achieve the success  
claimed by Monty Python's Flying Circus. One reason may be that Q5  
was transmitted on BBC2, a 'minority' channel, which would  
admittedly have had its 'cult' audience for Q5. This audience may

well have grown more over subsequent years were it not for the second reason, the very presence (on BBC1) of Monty Python's Flying Circus, not programmed at the same time but nevertheless functioning as more charismatic cult-object. This in turn suggests a third kind of reason, Milligan's own anti-charismatic and problematic image, his more profound dissatisfaction with the world. For him, comedy was an (even) more serious business than for the Monty Python team, with the result that his surreal/nonsense humour could often cross the boundary between pleasure and pain, frequently *testing how much* repetition, say, or how gratuitous a sexual image is possible before a comedic effect is lost. This is radical questioning indeed, and the risks may consequently be greater:

"... the clown, the comedian, handle something not quite proper - something embarrassing, astonishing and shocking; although the clown holds the licentious thing in his hand ... he knows, and his audience knows, and both he and his audience know that the other knows, that he is not the thing ... He is playing with fire; but he is not the fire, (and) in the moment he identifies himself with the fire he is no longer funny ... That fine delightful sense of balance and mastery is lost, and the clown becomes pathetic, ineffective, disgusting."<sup>206</sup>

Graham Chapman recounts how he used this kind of nonsense humour when he returned to Cambridge to speak at the University Union dressed as a carrot;

"And when it was my turn to make a speech, I said nothing. Just stood there. Stood there and said nothing. And that was my comment on the whole bloody business of people standing up and debating; trying to be clever, and eventually becoming politicians - fucking mess, they're a load of bloody idiots, and none of them have any social conscience. I had to go on standing there beyond the point where it became embarrassing, in order for it to become embarrassing again. So I carried on standing there for a whole ten minutes, saying nothing. They laughed initially, because of the costume. They were all expecting some enormously witty remark to come out, apparently, to explain all this. But it didn't ... I lay down and rolled across the floor to Ivor Cutler ... and hissed 'get me out of this, Ivor'. So he

stood up and read a poem, which nobody understood (I didn't). They were all totally bemused by what was going on. Then at last, I was able to go and sit down, in my carrot costume."<sup>207</sup>

It is significant that the Monty Python programmes (and films), for all their innovation and occasional 'offensiveness' rarely if ever flirt with this area of embarrassment. This may well have been a result of the 'team writing' method. By June 1988 the impulse to such exposure does not seem to have deserted Graham Chapman. In a brief appearance before a live audience of some 80,000 (and many millions of television viewers) at the Nelson Mandela birthday concert at Wembley Stadium, his sole contribution was to invite maximum abuse from his audience!

This is all very reminiscent of the risks involved in studying shit/dirt (cf. pg.5 above), of being an embarrassment to the social order. Charles clearly evokes the taboo, the excremental as the comedian's subject-matter. Insofar as the 'rules' of narrative, of jokes, of punch-lines, of TV comedy, (of a kind of language) in general are the subject of Spike Milligan's humour, this is a challenge to the spectator's subject-position in symbolisation and can be rejected as dirty, as "inconvenant". The perceived threat of a return of pre-symbolic modes of perception is as frightening as the return of repressed anxieties about the excremental or the genital.

While Milligan completely abandoned punchlines, the Monty Python method was at first to replace them with intrusive characters such as the colonel ("I'm stopping this sketch because it's silly"), or

the knight, which really substituted one form of 'punctuation' for another. Wilmut claims that

"the team found that characters such as the knight and the colonel became popular in themselves, rather like a visual equivalent of the catch-phrase, which they despised as a cheap way of raising a laugh; these characters were later phased out."<sup>208</sup>

but the technique did persist and was very much in evidence, for example, in the film And Now For Something Completely Different, where in addition to Graham Chapman's colonel there are linking devices such as Michael Palin's wandering joke-writer which permit the movement from one 'sketch' to another without the use of a punchline. The Monty Python programmes also tended to end sketches with what Wilmut calls a "rave-up" ending, which gives the impression that this device may have been used when the team couldn't think of another way out of the sketch. Certainly the 'rave-up'/'escalation into disorder' now seems a standard ending in TV comedy as diverse as The Benny Hill Show and (admittedly less formulaic-ally) The Young Ones. Spike Milligan would surely not approve.

In his discussion of Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the "nonsense form known as 'coq-à-l'âne'";

"This is a genre of intentionally absurd verbal combinations, a form of completely liberated speech that ignores all norms, even those of elementary logic."<sup>209</sup>

"The images chosen ... are devoid of all visible links."<sup>210</sup>

This jumbling of images, which in Rabelaisian literature corresponds to the "generating, devouring defecating body fused with nature and with cosmic phenomena", is identified by Bakhtin as a popular-festive form, as carnivalesque (cf. pp.11-12 above).

"... it was a form which granted momentary liberation from all logical links - a form of free recreation. It was, so to speak, the carnivalisation of speech, which freed it from

the gloomy seriousness of official philosophy as well as from truisms and commonplace ideas."<sup>211</sup>

As Jackson notes,

"... what Bakhtin terms carnivalistic and official selves can be made equivalent to Lacan's distinction between different stages of development, the imaginary and the symbolic."<sup>212</sup>

Again it is very tempting to apply this description to some of the Monty Python material, where the progression is not quite 'coq-à-l'âne' but makes frequent use of non-sequiturs and apparently random associations.

If any doubt remains as to the problem in this area,

"... it is a matter of apprehending the symbolic as repressive and crippling to the subject, and of attempting to transform the relations between the symbolic and the imaginary."<sup>213</sup>

Gershon Legman<sup>214</sup> discusses the ways in which children can manipulate the structures of questions and answers and of jokes to subvert authority and to mock representatives of the Law (parents, teachers).

One weapon frequently thus used is "fausse candeur", feigned innocence. Freud is not unaware of this.

"... the possibility of misleading naivety. We may assume in the child an ignorance that no longer exists; and children often present themselves as naive, so as to enjoy a liberty that they would otherwise not be granted."<sup>215</sup>

Presumably for Freud the pleasantries that such situations produce ("Why doesn't daddy put his ship in mummy's harbour?") still represent innocent 'play' on the child's part, and would not be classed as comic. Surely, though, Freud would accept that at the same time the child's intervention has a serious function. Many instances of

such 'humour'<sup>216</sup> are directed towards real embarrassment of an adult figure:

"Tout le sel de (cette) plaisanterie vient de ce que cette situation n'a rien de drôle ... vengeance calculée."<sup>217</sup>

Even if we see the calculation as a 'preconscious' one,

"... sauf exception, toute plaisanterie exige une victime ... Armé de sa fausse candeur et prétendant les prendre au pied de la lettre, l'enfant retourne ses mensonges contre leurs auteurs."<sup>218</sup>

- an echo of Freud's recognition of the tendentious nature of all jokes, and a prefiguring of the joke-structure which we shall look at below.

Legman also identifies an important determinant of the form which this infantile revolt takes as the deep-rooted assumptions about 'truth' which pervade the pedagogic methods of Western education: rare are the schools/institutions in which questioning and free thought are encouraged; rather are children (still) led constantly to search for "the right answer", the "best" way of doing something. For Legman, the revolt through erotic/obscene jokes stems from this. Ribald responses

"... sont dictées, non seulement par le 'ça', mais par une révolte contre une situation répressive."<sup>219</sup>

Here the discourses of the (dominant) parent or teacher-figure can be manipulated by the child to expose in turn the manipulation implicit in the dominant discourse. Scatological and erotic remarks are at first relatively permissible for the child:

"... il se concentre d'abord sur les intérêts scatologiques qu'il sait lui être, étant donné son âge, relativement permis. Il se livre ainsi à un certain nombre d'insultes sado-co-anales aux parents, insultes qui deviendront plus sérieuses lorsqu'elles entreront dans une sphère plus directement sexuelle."<sup>220</sup>

Two examples may clarify this.

- (i) "Maman, qu'est-ce qu'ils font?" demande une petite fille en montrant le taureau qui est grimpé sur la vache.  
 "Eh bien, tu comprends, le pauvre taureau est fatigué et la gentille vache l'aide à rentrer à l'étable".  
 "Toujours la même chose! On commence par aider quelqu'un et pour finir on se fait baiser."
- (ii) Une petite fille de huit ans demande à sa mere:  
 "Comment il est venu mon petit frère?"  
 "C'est le Père Noël qui l'a apporté."  
 "Et le bébé de la voisine, c'est aussi le Père Noël?"  
 "Oui, ma chérie."  
 "Mais, bordel, il y a donc personne qui baise dans ce patelin?"<sup>221</sup>

This destruction of a falsely chaste or polite discourse is homologous with Freud's "degradation to being a child" and with Bergson's idea that comedy arises from making the physical more obvious, from exposing "the soul's embarrassment with its body". These kinds of mechanisms of degradation are very common in Monty Python, and some explicit examples of these 'clever' childish responses crop up in The Meaning of Life; during the 'Every Sperm Is Sacred' sketch, two remarks by individual children appear: "Couldn't mummy have worn some kind of pessary?" and "Couldn't you have your balls cut off?" Indeed such responses were (more innocently) prefigured in a sketch from a 1967 transmission of I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again, in which John Cleese was involved:

Cyril : Let's give her test three.  
 All 3 children : moo, moo, moo!  
 Cyril's mum : Well, what's the game, children - can you see a moo-cow, den?  
 Cyril : She's so stupid!

The roots of this obscene rebellion may themselves lie in some notion of ignorance, according to Legman. He notes a tendency (which is not confined to children) to find obscene anything which is not understood. (This is certainly supported by the way in which words such as 'testimonials', 'piste' etc. so predictably bring



waves of laughter from a TV (comedy) studio audience!) He quotes a 1st century Roman saying, "Omne ignotum pro obsceno" then comments

"Galgacus sous-estimait les talents des écoliers à venir. Car il n'y a rien qui ne soit potentiellement obscène."<sup>222</sup>

Further, this 'ignorance', this not understanding is intimately linked with a subservient position in relation to authority, to the Law. In order to stand a chance of acceding to a position of possessing or inhabiting the Law (the possible modalities by which male and female sexed subjects can relate to the Law in Lacanian terms are labyrinthine), the child must in our culture negotiate such hazards as the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety. The child's use of obscenity as a form of revolt can then be seen as an at least nascent subversion of the dominant symbolic order. Freud is also aware of this as a possible function of properly aggressive/tendentious jokes in adult life:

"The prevention of invective or of insulting rejoinders by external circumstances is such a common case that tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of caricature lies in this same factor: we laugh at them even if they are unsuccessful simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit."<sup>223</sup>

There thus appear to be two conflicting functions being fulfilled by childish obscene humour. A childlike revolt/subversion of the Law using embarrassing humour has to be seen in relation to the notion of jokes and the comedic (sexual or otherwise) as managing mechanisms, as a means of dealing with tension and with problematic repressed material.<sup>224</sup> The latter forms of the comedic, as theorised by Freud, facilitate the subject's socialisation and submission to symbolisation.

There is a certain congruence between much of the above material on speech and the sexual and the different vocabularies used in referring to parts of the body (bouche etc./gueule etc.) by different classes as described by Bourdieu (cf. pg. 53 above):

"... the 'popular'/working-class sensibility characteristically refuses "airs and graces" and prefers what is rudely "natural"."

Again this is very similar to Freud's comments on differences and developments in the use of what he calls 'smut' (German: Zote).

"It is remarkable how universally popular a smutty interchange of this kind is among the common people and how it unfailingly produces a cheerful mood ... The uttering of an undisguised indecency gives the first person enjoyment and makes the third person laugh.

Only when we rise to a society of a more refined education do the formal conditions of jokes play a part. The smut becomes a joke and is only tolerated when it has the character of a joke."<sup>225</sup>

The result of this distinction is that

"When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut."<sup>226</sup>

- surely a piece of "optimum consciousness" on Freud's part. His education and social position did not give him the means to pursue the implications of this distinction much further, but he did well to formulate the role of joke-techniques so concisely.

Given this function of the joke in maintaining social boundaries, the question arises of

"... under exactly what coefficient of stress a code of 'decency' breaks apart and allows the human being to fall steeply down to the recognition of his inalienable flesh."<sup>227</sup>

This "code of decency" which can again conveniently be theorized with the aid of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, 'distinction'

etc., is, however, flexible, and so does not break apart so easily;  
it can be suspended;

"We can observe how men of a higher class are at once induced, when they are in the company of girls of an inferior class, to reduce their smutty jokes to the level of simple smut."<sup>228</sup>

and cohesion of a class valorising the joke-work's function of maintaining 'decency' through techniques of allusion etc. would probably not in any case be threatened by isolated breakdowns in decorum, which could either be attributed to lovable eccentricity or rejected, and the culprit expelled.

More interestingly, the acquisition of cultural capital is also evoked by Legman in his discussion of subversive humour at school. There are those pupils who "play the game", who (quite possibly because of a 'supportive' home background) are ready to acquire the cultural capital on offer, and there are those who do not want to. The obscene laughter of the latter is then often directed at the expense of the former. The 'goody-goody' is implicitly recognized as endorsing the oppressive power.

"Leurs réponses visent enfin les 'bons élèves', leur façon d'ar-ti-cu-ler en récitant, les nobles sentiments dont ils ornent leurs rédactions, et d'une façon générale la docilité avec laquelle ils acceptent toutes les règles du jeu qu'on leur propose."<sup>229</sup>

A number of the jokes employed<sup>230</sup> by the "erudite imbecile" are specifically directed to mocking the rewards, to showing their worthlessness (which, the child has already learned, is effectively done by using excremental material).

"C'est de la fausse monnaie que la maîtresse lui refille ... le mauvais élève la refuse et la rend."<sup>231</sup>

Whilst it remains true that deconstructive work on symbolisation in comedy as elsewhere is potentially an important tool in an

oppositional practice, we should not overvalue the potential of the obscene humour which has its roots in childhood rebelliousness.

Legman himself provides the relativisation:

"Des millénaires de mythologie, de religion, d'hystérie collective (jours de l'an) de littérature névrotique de masse (science fiction) n'ont pas réussi à dissiper l'ombre menaçante d'un père décidé à tuer ou tout au moins à châtrer son fils, à le punir de l'attraction qu'il éprouve pour la mère, pour la soeur etc. N'espérons-pas qu'une poignée de plaisanteries obscènes y parviendront."<sup>232</sup>

(iii) Relation between social, ideological and psychoanalytic functions.

Much of the above should have demonstrated the inseparability of social and psychoanalytic considerations of the comedic. This is moreover not surprising if we consider the relationship between the ideological and the psychoanalytic instances. It will, of course, be impossible to go into great detail here, but it is worth laying out some of the theoretical parameters which will be implicit in subsequent work.

Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that the individual subject is an effect of language, the result of entry into the symbolic. Strictly speaking the subject in psychoanalysis is not a thing or a person, but is defined topographically as a position in relation to a number of terms representing the instances of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. The precise position in which the subject is held depends on the exact manner of entry into the symbolic, that is to say on determinants such as gender, position in relation to mother- and father-figures, negotiation of Oedipal anxiety, castration fears and anality:

"... this familial ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and ... it is in this implacable and more or less 'pathological' (presupposing that any meaning can be assigned to that term) structure that the former subject-to-be will have to 'find' 'its' place, i.e. 'become' the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance. It is clear that this ideological constraint and pre-appointment, and all the rituals of rearing and then education in the family, have some relationship with what Freud studied in the forms of the pre-genital and genital 'stages' of sexuality, i.e. in the 'grip' of what Freud registered by its effects as being the unconscious."<sup>233</sup>

This way of putting it also helps to reiterate what has already emerged above, that the way in which early socialisation and the entry into the Symbolic and a relation to the Law are negotiated are always culture-specific, in no way absolute or transcultural.

When the subject is constituted in language, then, the entry into the Symbolic is also an entry into the social and into ideology. It is here that problems in any attempt to bring together psychoanalytic theory and a kind of Marxism begin to arise, for Althusser's notion of the "interpellation" of the subject explicitly assumes some sort of "always-already" subject and at many points appears oblivious to psychoanalytic categories:

"That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality accessible to everyone."<sup>234</sup>

At other points, however, this impression is partially dispelled (the reference to Althusser pg.165 above was not an accident, for that reason), and it seems instead that Althusser, rather than being hostile or ignorant about the psychoanalytic ramifications of his work, simply had not thought those ramifications through. Thus there have been a number of more or less trenchant critiques<sup>235</sup> of Althusser's use of psychoanalytic terminology. A fairer assessment does crop up in one of the critiques:

"It draws upon the term 'imaginary' as used by Lacan, but its mobilisation by Althusser only acknowledges the inadequacy of the terms available in Marxism, rather than using the full implications of the psychoanalytic term. Had he so used it, Althusser's theory of ideology might have been very much more effective."<sup>236</sup>

The 'subject', then, is constituted in terms of class, gender, race, nation, and the constituted position is then maintained (or, perhaps, shifted) ideologically.

Ideology in our model is any system of representations in a specific historical/material context by which an imaginary relation is constructed for a subject with her/his real conditions of existence.

"L'ideologie ... est un systeme (possedant sa logique et sa rigueur propre) de representations (images, mythes, idees ou concepts selon les cas) doue d'une existence et d'un role historique au sein d'une societe donnee."<sup>237</sup>

Although Hirst appears at one point to accept uncritically that

"the imaginary modality of living is necessary because men's conditions of existence can never be given to them in experience"<sup>238</sup>

the imaginary relation is nevertheless the ingredient of Althusser's theory which simultaneously renders it unprovable/opaque/ theoreticist and creates vital links with psychoanalysis and the unconscious. For the sceptics, the pervasiveness and inescapability of ideology (is it possible to experience anything outside ideology? is discourse outside ideology possible?) is no easier (and no harder) to take than unknowability of the unconscious except through a reading of symptoms.

Certainly the question of knowability/testability of reality-status can become highly vexed, and it soon becomes apparent that no claim can be made about "the real world" which is not itself under-

pinned with ontological assumptions. The most acute forms of this epistemological scepticism lead to 'conventionalism'.

"The main thrust of the conventionalist attack on empiricism is that such a neutral observation language cannot in principle be found. Experience is never directly given, conceptless."<sup>239</sup>

In the acutest cases of conventionalism, there seems to be no room for experience at all:

"The limit case which all conventionalisms more or less approach is one in which the world is in effect constructed in and by theory. given that there is no rational procedure for choosing between theories, relativism is the inevitable result. Epistemological relativism does not necessarily entail a denial that there is a real material world. But if our only access to it is via a succession of theories which describe it in mutually exclusive terms, then the concept of an independent reality ceases to have any force or function."<sup>240</sup>

An alternative may be to disallow any distinctions with respect to 'reality-status', and to

"... understand fantasies (of any description) as one reality among others. Any attempt to label one phenomenon of human existence 'more real' than another is arbitrary."<sup>241</sup> (original emphasis)

Such problems notwithstanding, I prefer to concentrate here on the more 'positive' reading of Althusser, on the productive links with a "politics of the unconscious".

Although all and any representations can be/are ideological, Althusser also develops a model of a number of Ideological State Apparata (ISAs) the roles of which are to articulate a broad "dominant ideology". Such apparata,<sup>242</sup> usually observable most readily in institutionalised form (family, school, church ...) have the function of reproducing or reinforcing existing relations of production which favour the dominant class interests.

Mention of the family and of education reminds us of the link between psychological repression (of the excremental, then of other aspects of sexuality) and family and other social structures alluded to in the first section of this study (pp.34 ff.) we find that we have observed the kinship between the psychoanalytic and the ideological before. The crucial concept is that of the unconscious.

We can underline at this point the exceptional relevance of this psychoanalytic/ideological relation to filmic representation in particular. Films have long been compared with dreams because of the (usually) darkened room and the oneiric suspension of reality which they encourage; as we know, dreams are among the prime 'symptoms' of the unconscious. This assimilation makes films potentially especially effective as carriers of (invisible) dominant ideologies, whether they be ideologies 'about' communication itself (the formal strategies of documentary, the imparting of knowledge through narrative), or ideologies which run as a sub-text suffusing the more evident plot content (assumptions about family, religion, gender-roles etc. which a given film may take for granted or 'work' to reinforce). Otherwise put, the cinema is ideally equipped to pass on representations, unconsciously sanctioned by the agencies of the dominant ideologies, via the individual spectator's unconscious.

To summarise. People are "prepared for ideology" first by the emergence of the psychoanalytic subject with its access to language and the Symbolic and with its position in relation to the Law and the Other, and secondly by the individuating effect of ideology's 'interpellation' by which the individual is constituted as a knowing subject. These processes are nevertheless profoundly unconscious,



so that ideological messages, beliefs (sets of internalized representations) pass more often than not for "common sense". In a society where one group or class has control over the means of production, the dominant ideology serves to naturalise that controlling relation, to create (or tend to create) an imaginary relation common to all that society's subjects in which the relation of dominance/subservience is seen as timeless, part of "l'ordre des choses", and reproduction of the existing relations of production is effected. Oppositional ideologies thus have to work so much harder to overcome this barrier:

"... one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says 'I am ideological'."

The crux of this argument, then, is that the ideological comes to a subject through an imaginary relation, which is by definition of an unconscious nature. The situation is conveniently summarised by Rosemary Jackson:

"Ideology, - roughly speaking, the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, those ways in which men's relation to the world is lived through various systems of meaning such as religion, family, law, moral codes, education, culture etc., - is not something simply handed down from one conscious mind to another, but is profoundly unconscious." <sup>244</sup> (original emphasis)

Jackson's analysis of fantastic literature is in many ways an exemplary bringing together of ideology and the unconscious as critical concepts; her work is useful here insofar as her insights are more generally applicable, can be re-read to include other areas of cultural production. When Jackson discusses Freud's 'Totem and Taboo' (1913) and writes

"The uncanny represses drives which have to be repressed for the sake of cultural continuity. Freud regards anything uncanny, or anything provoking dread, as subject to cultural

taboo. A resurfacing of long-familiar anxieties/desires in uncanny incidents constitutes a 'return of the repressed'."245

we cannot help being reminded of Freud's formulation of the humorous response as a release of psychic energy freed from repression.

Coming closer to home (bearing in mind the above discussion of the subversive potential of obscene humour), Jackson finds that

"Fantasies are not ... countercultural merely through (this) thematic transgression. On the contrary, they frequently serve (as does Gothic fiction) to reconfirm institutional order by supplying a vicarious fulfilment of desire and neutralizing an urge towards transgression ... A more subtle and subversive use of the fantastic appears with works which threaten to disrupt or eat away at the syntax or structure by which order is made."246

To switch back to comedy, these quotes relate nicely to part of an ingenious though eclectic classification of comedy by Maurice Charney. Area no.1 is "the discontinuous":

"Comedy depends on the breaking of rational order and causality. We may abruptly shift perspective and juxtapose separate pieces of action as if they belonged with each other. The time-sequence is flexible and subject-object relations may be reversed. The overall feeling is one of uneasiness, since the patterns created are crazy quilts and random mosaics."247

Once again we find ourselves in Monty Python territory, though significantly the other conditions are apparently fulfilled but the "overall feeling of uneasiness" seems relatively weak. We are also back with nonsense and its potential for deconstruction.

For Koestler, nonsense depends on "the illusion of meaning" created by the recognition of a familiar form such as a proverb or a nursery-rhyme but with one word changed, two reversed etc. For Bergson,

"A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form."248

In both cases the form is somehow inadequate to the content. Freud

also recognizes this as an important source of 'the comic'; his example of the absurd content inhabiting a standard form is the following:

"What is it that hangs on the wall and that one can dry one's hands on?"  
- a hand towel.  
- no, a herring.  
- but ... a herring doesn't hang on the wall.  
- you can hang it up there.  
- but who in the world is going to dry his hands on a herring?!  
-"Well (is the soothing reply), you don't have to."<sup>249</sup>

Freud's explanation is

"This explanation ... shows how far this question falls short of a genuine riddle; and on account of its absolute inadequacy it strikes us as being - instead of simply nonsensically stupid - irresistibly comic."<sup>250</sup>

As we have noted, Freud's conception of 'logic' and its narrow relation to 'natural' social relations appears to have been rather restrictive - as also does Bergson's, but it does now seem fair to describe "... the comic in its extreme form ... (as) the logic of the absurd."<sup>251</sup> The question of whether appeal to such an other logic is politically or philosophically progressive or useful is, however, an open one. As Freud also notes, nonsense largely signifies an attempted return to "childish" pre-logic:

"... it must not be forgotten that the nonsense in a joke is an end in itself, since the intention of recovering the old pleasure in nonsense is among the joke-work's motives."<sup>252</sup>

It is probably a mistake to subscribe to any essentialist view of 'human nature' with respect to pleasure. We may choose to say that the fundamental instinct is towards pleasure in 'play', hence in entropic 'nonsense', or we may choose to identify some other 'instinct' as fundamental, for instance

"There is something in the human psyche which commits man to non-enjoyment, to work."<sup>253</sup>

Something like this latter assumption presumably underlies those

approaches which are inclined to deny the radicality of 'play'. In discussing the subversive functions of fragmentary modes of writing in the fantastic, for example, Jackson identifies the nonsense of Lear and Carroll as a different more playful mode, more ludic, therefore not so 'dangerous' to dominant signifying modes:

"Nonsense ... engages the force towards disorder in continual play. It tends to recombine different semantic units which remain distinct from one another. It fractures rather than dissolves, returning to rigidity and separation of individual units."<sup>254</sup>

A third possibility stands apart from the above two alternatives; if there is any 'essential human nature', it is in any case unknowable, so any attempt to base political evaluation of the 'returning to play' role of comedic nonsense is based on already partisan assumptions. The position which I adopt here is that deconstruction and a valorisation of play through nonsense are potentially useful tools for rethinking the subject's position in ideology; whether the textual and other strategies deployed for the situation of the viewing subject in relation to the 'nonsense' in Monty Python films work towards such a rethinking is another matter.<sup>255</sup>

Another point at which Jackson's work on the fantastic links the psychoanalytic with the ideological is in her discussion of the strategies employed (by dominant ideologies or by some kind of psychic economy) for dealing with the potentially deviant 'otherness' which she identifies in the face of fantastic subversion are outright rejection, polemical refutation, and assimilation/recuperation. The rejection is thus described:

"The dismissal of the fantastic to the margins of literary culture is in itself an ideologically significant gesture, one which is not dissimilar to culture's silencing of unreason."<sup>256</sup>

and Jackson goes on to look at some of the ways in which the fantastic has been 'recuperated':

"Those elements which have been designated 'fantastic' -effecting a movement towards undifferentiation and a condition of entropy - have been constantly reworked, rewritten and re-covered to serve rather than subvert the dominant ideology."<sup>256</sup> (original emphasis)

An interesting corollary to this model has been suggested by Chris Powell.<sup>258</sup> Interestingly, the (tentative) model appears to be equally applicable to the psychoanalytic notion of the subject and to the hegemonic function of ideologies on a social level. Powell suggests that there is a gradation of 'coping' mechanisms (psychic or social) when faced with a deviation from the norm, with some anomaly.

First, the threat of deviation may be ignored, explained away, repressed. Ultimately (consciously), no threat is perceived and the 'meaning' of the deviancy is not explained. Secondly, the threat may impose itself on the preconscious level. A humorous response is then designed either to "exercise informal control" and nullify the threat (pp.87-88 above) or to strengthen a group resistance to the deviancy (pp.101-104 above). Thirdly, the comedic response may seem inadequate, and the deviancy may be explained away as mental instability, lunacy, insanity, or as some eccentric/psychological quirk.<sup>259</sup> Fourthly and finally, the threat may be conceived on a more 'fundamental' level, as 'evil', as having a spiritual inhuman source.

The nicest examples of the way this model functions (ignore → laugh at → stigmatize → see as evil) include the media treatment of Idi Amin, the womens' movement, even events such as conferences

on humour!<sup>260</sup> A more complex example is that of absurd and offensive humour itself - a possibly/potentially subversive tool both on individual and social levels. Where such humour is seen as threatening, it may also be possible to observe the progression from the (extreme) response of indifference to a superior laughter of dismissal (and non-understanding? - cf. pg. 127 above), then to a reassuring determinist linking of the troubling material with readily assimilable details of the individual (in this case Pythons') personal histories. Perhaps only the most vociferous defenders of conventional morality have been tempted to invoke satanic motives for some of the Python infractions. In fact a substantial campaign was mounted, particularly in the USA, arguing that Monty Python's Life of Brian was (literally) diabolical. Rabbi Benjamin Hecht: "I have an idea that it was produced in Hell."<sup>261</sup>

### 2.3 Obscene/excremental and grotesque comedicity

At the point in the development of his theory where Freud opens up the provisional distinction between tendentious and innocent jokes, he also proposes two types of 'tendentious' jokes: obscene and aggressive. In what follows we must again bear in mind that Freud's remarks were written in a particularly 'patriarchal' society and that, despite his later scathing analysis of the structure of the family, his work is permeated with assumptions about men and women which seem strange to us now.

The structure of the 'obscene' joke is based on

"... a further relevant fact that smut is directed to a particular person, by whom one is sexually excited and who, on hearing it, is expected to become aware of the speaker's

excitement and as a result to become sexually excited in turn. Instead of this excitement the other person may be led to feel shame or embarrassment, which is only a reaction against the excitement and, in a roundabout way, is an admission of it. Smut is thus originally directed against women and may be equated with attempts at seduction."<sup>262</sup>

Moreover, Freud here points out the link with infantile notions of sexuality:

"The sexual material which forms the content of smut includes more than what is peculiar to each sex; it includes what is common to both sexes and to which the feeling of shame extends - that is to say, what is excremental in the most comprehensive sense."<sup>263</sup>

The joke is then a development in which the threatening psychic energy associated with this sexual aggressivity can be released through the fore-pleasure of the joke-technique and a displacement of the explicit material through techniques such as allusion, representation by the opposite etc. For this process to operate a third person is necessary as 'accomplice' for the first; the second person (*la femme qui disparaît*) need not be present at all, but is implicit in the joke-structure:

"Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled."<sup>264</sup>

Freud also points out that the joke-mechanism as means of dealing with expression of 'smut' is more highly developed in 'higher' social strata.

"And here at last we can understand what it is that jokes achieve in the service of their purpose. They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way."<sup>265</sup>

The obstacle standing in the way is then identified through the process of repression, which blocks the enjoyment of undisguised obscenity. Freud's remarks about the more important role of jokes

in more 'refined' circles are correct enough, but are then thrown into even sharper relief by the admission that

"It is our belief that civilization and higher education have a large influence in the development of repression ..."<sup>266</sup>

We can extrapolate from this the interesting thesis that the phenomenon of jokes (and perhaps the comedic more generally) is closely linked, through the mechanism of repression, to the kind of social and cultural values endorsed by a particular 'civilization' and education. We have already suggested<sup>267</sup> that the forms which repression takes are linked to a social formation and ultimately to economic determinants. If Freud is right, then, there may be a direct line between the existence of jokes in particular social situations (and their use in media) and the economic/ideological function which they serve. The deliberate flaunting of 'smut' in comedy, in some Monty Python films specifically (Waitress: "Compliments of the Holiday Inn. Have a nice fuck!"; "You want for them to pull up their skirts and lean over the chair with their legs apart", both in Meaning of Life),<sup>268</sup> can then perhaps be seen as a subversion of the dominant rules governing 'tendentious' material; nevertheless it seems that here any 'subversive' potential is limited to liberating sexual aggression as sexual aggression. The determinants producing the male-impulse-to-sexual-aggression-to-woman are left unexamined and untouched. Although, as we have noted, intellectual distantiation and the pleasures to be gained from the Monty Python texts in this area are important, we cannot ignore Freud's remark that

"... individual components of a person's sexual constitution, in particular, can appear as motives for the construction of a joke. A whole class of obscene jokes allows one to infer the presence of a concealed inclination to exhibitionism in the inventors; aggressive tendentious jokes succeed best in people in whose sexuality a powerful sadistic component is



demonstrable, which is more or less inhibited in real life."<sup>269</sup>

We note in Freud's above statement of the purpose of (especially tendentious) jokes (pp.141-142 above) that both lustful and hostile instincts are satisfied. The mechanism operating for obscene jokes is thus seen to work also for hostile jokes. An unfortunately heavy formulation makes the same point:

"In the case of obscene jokes, which are derived from smut, it turns the third person who originally interfered with the sexual situation into an ally, before whom the woman must feel shame, by bribing him with the gift of its yield of pleasure. In the case of aggressive purposes it employs the same method in order to turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one."<sup>270</sup>

If we put this together with Freud's own view that 'innocent' jokes serve the same basic purposes as 'tendentious' jokes (pg.111 above), then it seems that Neale is more or less right in himself claiming that

"Weber, like Freud, stresses the importance of this tripartite structure, claiming it, again like Freud, as 'paradigmatic for the joke in general'."<sup>271</sup>

Only the word "claim" is a slight exaggeration. The model drawn from Samuel Weber summarised by Neale describes the three 'joke-positions' in Lacanian terms:

"The structure is marked by the presence of the following elements: eroticism, aggression, a (displaced or absent) object of desire, speech (language, signification), and an other whose presence and whose reactions are crucial to the status both of the speech and its speaker. With all these elements in place, the structure can be read as the structure of desire itself; language, a speaking subject, an other (Lacan's 'objet petit a'), an Other (site of the instances of the symbolic and the Law), and pleasure and aggression as effects of the relations between them. Smut is the paradigm of the joke insofar as its structure is the structure of desire.

What is being referred to are places or points within a

discursive process. And these places or points can be occupied by one and the same individual."<sup>272</sup>

There is therefore a sense in which all jokes can be said to be sexual in an infantile sense, hence to have an excremental component. Where the basic tendentious 'material' of the joke is itself sexual/excremental, and where the allusion-method commonly employed by the joke-work is partially or completely absent, 'smut' may, as we have seen above, begin to emerge, but the results of such an emergence (in films in particular) will depend largely on the narrative and other strategies deployed within the larger text.

The structure of 'the comic', for Freud, is distinguished from that of the joke in that it requires only two persons or structural positions. Thus when a 'first person' observes a person or situation towards whom/which he/she can feel superiority, a preconscious comparison is effected with the expenditure of energy which that first person would need to expend in the same situation.

"The first person compares how he or she would speak or behave in the same situation and laughter is the result of the difference. Precisely to that extent, to the extent that mastery, superiority and a narcissistic investment in the ego of the first person are involved, so hostility and aggression are seen by Freud as inherent in all forms of the comic."<sup>273</sup>

There are a number of problems with the distinction which Freud operates between jokes and 'the comic'; as we have seen above, the definition of 'the comic' itself is far less rigorous than that of the joke. A useful situation/critique of Freud's distinction is furnished by the Neale piece. What may be relevant here is a similarity between obscene jokes and "the comic and sexuality and obscenity", namely their common basis in a drive to expose.

Freud's comments on this are rather confused (and anyway limited to one page!) and are scarcely relevant to a consideration of filmic images. For Freud, the comic is something which is 'found' or 'discovered', often in a person or an event which is only unintentionally funny. He appears not to be concerned with any kind of performed comedy, least of all a calculated, pre-scripted comedic text. It has to be admitted that in much of the more detailed work on Meaning of Life which will follow, the distinction between jokes and 'the comic' will be deliberately blurred; the Freud-based material on jokes will be used where a comedic element can be seen as a joke (and here a fairly free interpretation will be necessary, since Freud has next to nothing to say about jokes which are partly or entirely visual), and elsewhere use will be made of the common ground between jokes and 'the comic', namely the economy in expenditure of psychic energy in relation to more or less repressed sexual material.

We have already discussed in an earlier section some aspects of the excremental. Let us recall Bakhtin's observation that

"... urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter."<sup>274</sup>

His remarks in this case refer essentially to the laughter which mocks natural functions and physicality, as part of a defence-mechanism against "cosmic terror". This terror is a fear of the elements, of forces beyond human control. The laughter of carnival then "... transforms cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster."<sup>275</sup> The carnivalesque was a mode of expression linked to the people, to a folk culture.

"Folk culture did not know this fear and overcame it through laughter, through lending a bodily substance to nature and the cosmos; for this folk culture was always based on the indestructible confidence in the might and final victory of man. Official culture, on the contrary, often used and even cultivated this fear in order to humiliate and oppress man."<sup>276</sup>

What Bakhtin calls "official culture" corresponds well with the ensemble of changes (cultural, linguistic, hygienist, economic and psychological) which were discussed in the first section. We can now also see that the recultivation of "cosmic fear" referred to by Bakhtin has driven the laughter underground, ... though 'carnivalesque laughter', the laughter of community, can certainly be argued not to have disappeared. By the middle of the 20th Century, deeply-ingrained class antagonisms may have replaced the cosmos; nevertheless

"the carnivalesque atmosphere which the threat of death and extinction can evoke combined with the intense social mobilisation of the peoples war to produce an immense guffaw at the paralysing poison of class ..."<sup>277</sup>

The system of repression and the particular mechanisms of dreams and jokes which have developed as coping mechanisms have been part of the object of study of the relatively recent discipline of psychoanalysis; yet it is a discipline with its own historical and cultural determinants, and its object of study perhaps has its limits. Thus we may agree with a psychoanalytic study like that of the sequence in The Navigator in which Buster Keaton<sup>278</sup> and his woman friend try to prepare a meal; we may agree that here there is a repressed anxiety about toilet-training which, by being displaced onto the more permissible food-preparation and assisted by devices such as repetition and the fore-pleasures of recognition/expectation with respect to Keaton and the narrative, is partially alleviated.

In more explicit or celebratory instances of excremental comedy, however, (the "theme" of mud in Monty Python and the Holy Grail,<sup>279</sup> for example, or the Fishfingers' dinner in Jabberwocky, or the faecal cabaret of The Kipper Kids in Fassbinder's Teater in Trance and Schroeter's Dress Rehearsal), there is perhaps a case to be made for "laughter in the face of cosmic terror". Let us leave this question open for the moment.

To return to the 'modern condition' of repression, Gershon Legman has identified anxiety about sexual and excretory functions as the source of much childish humour, including, this time, naive or unintentional humour. To reiterate an insight of Freud's:

"This is, however, the sense covered by sexuality in childhood, an age at which there is, as it were, a cloaca in which what is sexual and what is excremental are barely or not at all distinguished."<sup>280</sup>

The significance of primal scenes, early notions of genitality, are overdetermined by the hitherto more important excremental instance. Any anxiety with respect to toilet-training and cleanliness is carried over into the (mis)understanding of genital (hetero) sexuality. This gives rise to unintentional 'jokes' such as the child excitedly telling (his) friend about what he had seen his sister and her boy-friend doing on top of the piano, being asked "what did they do next? and answering "I don't know, I thought they were going to 'go' in the piano, so I went away."<sup>281</sup>

"Cette histoire a ceci d'intéressant qu'elle révèle chez l'enfant un second problème: l'enfant craint d'être puni pour incontinence fécale."<sup>281</sup>

Unassimilated (hence repressed) anxieties about anality are not confined to children. Where they exist for adults, the need for repression is more strictly enforced, and greater is the need for

either 'smut' or for jokes or some other form of the comedic as a mechanism for release of the trapped psychic energy; indeed as Klaus Theweleit argues, the unresolved confusion around female genital and excretory orifices has had (and continues to have) staggering implications for 'male' institutions such as the army. While sexual/excremental jokes/songs certainly bear witness to this anxiety/confusion,<sup>282</sup> fear of female sexuality has engendered the most rigid defences against shit:

"... the only defence is to 'stand fast' (clamping the buttocks tight shut): to think of, and believe in, the nation. At the centre of this defence stands the prohibition against any kind of mixing (of men and women, of inner self and outside world)."<sup>283</sup>

We can also recall, however, the above discussion (pp.124 ff.) of the child's revolt against authority, and the sexual/anal component in humour used for this purpose. Legman here also mentions instances in which the excremental revolt does not even trouble itself with the mechanisms of the comedic; naval mythology has it that many ships' crews have among them a "fantôme trou-de-cul" or "fantôme sème-la-merde" who is responsible for deposits of shit in strategic/embarrassing places.

"De toute évidence, le Fantôme Trou-de-cul est un héros, et ses prouesses oedipo-fécales expriment ouvertement, dans un style sadico-anal, la revanche des matelots sur les officiers."<sup>284</sup>

This also recalls the excremental revolt in prisons, schools<sup>285</sup> and other institutions, where toilet (and other) walls are periodically found to be smeared with shit, and beyond this the more overtly 'pathological' cases.

Incitements to such revolt have been made by a number of 'respectable' writers, among them Flaubert.

"The challenge to good manners issued by the young Flaubert was more virulent ... 'Let diarrhea drip into your boots, piss out of the window, shout out 'shit', defecate in full view, fart hard ...' Feces played a star role in his Rabelaisian schoolboy verbal revolt ..."<sup>286</sup>

In any case it is in this context quite easy to see openly scatological material in literature and films - be it comedic or not - as such an unsublimated drive to exposure, a legacy of childhood.

Yet, to oscillate again to a more constructive assessment of excremental humour, the individual preoccupation of a given writer or performer is rarely an 'explanation' of any but the most anecdotal aspects of a particular film. Though the 'treatment' and choice of subject are to some extent determined by some sort of individual choice, the subject material is most frequently drawn from observed situations, observed 'life'.

"Walking down a street in Copenhagen, (Terry Gilliam) saw a well-dressed conventional couple parading arm in arm; with them was a snowy white poodle with a plaster stuck over its bottom. 'Amazing, isn't it - when I draw that people will say, "Ah, that's not life."' "<sup>287</sup>

Let us turn, finally, to one particular aspect of grotesque humour of which we shall find many instances in the Monty Python films and which is accessible to psychoanalytic analysis. Bakhtin has referred to a pre-psychological "cosmic terror". Norman Holland has suggested<sup>288</sup> that the uncanny is based on infantile material which may involve an explicit threat to life or body, or an anxiety about some activity such as masturbation, aggressivity, sex, over-eating etc. This represents the psychoanalytic version of cosmic fear. The mobilisation of comedic mechanisms is what turns the uncanny into the grotesque, and we can readily detect the grotesque

violence of, say, the duel in Monty Python and the Holy Grail and the grotesque overeating sequence in Meaning of Life. A more recurrent theme in Monty Python is that of fragmented or mutilated bodies. Both Melanie Klein and Lacan with their different vocabularies have stressed the early infantile preoccupation with "a terror of being devoured, torn up and destroyed by her" (Klein), with

"... the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body, in short, the 'imagos' that I have grouped together under the heading - which indeed seems a structural one - of 'imagos of the fragmented body.'"289

Though Lacan seems to see the existence of such imagos as absolute, transcultural, he does suggest that

"... in advanced societies ... it denies respect (itself a fairly recent cultural development) for the natural forms of the human body."290

We thus seem to have two (extreme) possible explanations for modern comedic use of fragmentation, dismemberment etc. such as that of Monty Python. First, it may be an example of such "disrespect" for "natural" forms, as may also be observed in fashion, in the fetishism of pornography, even in the symptom-oriented anti-holistic Western form of medicine. Doses of outrageous bodily fragmentation such as Gilliam's animations may then function as a form of 'inoculation', a defence against a more painful surfacing of fears of mutilation. Or secondly, it may be necessary to question Lacan's description of "natural forms of the human body" and suppose that prior to the development of modern repression-structures there (co)-existed ways of thinking of the body in which fragmentation and fluidity were not a threat. This is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's anoedipal unconscious, in which



"partial objects are not representations of parental figures or of the basic pattern of family relations; they are parts of desiring-machines, having to do with a process and with relations of production that are both irreducible to anything that may be made to conform to the Oedipal triangle."<sup>291</sup>

We are back with the mediaeval grotesque body. Clearly the representations of fragmentary bodies deployed by Monty Python cannot simply be seen as throwbacks to the mediaeval grotesque, but it would probably not be too much to suggest that there are (partly unconsciously implanted) elements which may tend to subvert modern notion of the body and to institute a partial return to an earlier model. As we have recorded above, however, the way in which modern audiences respond to such an invitation is likely to be another matter.

#### 2.4 Film/TV

Finally, we shall consider some of the specific ways in which film and television studies may be able to accommodate some of the above material on tendentious aspects of the comedic. This will not constitute any overview of theories of screen comedy!

First we may look at the limitations of Freud's three-person model for the joke in its application to film. The 'first person' in the structure is the joke-teller, the addressor. Clearly there is a problem here with all film and TV comedy except that with direct-address, cabaret or stand-up joke sequences (though there is still, in these cases, the role of film or video image in articulating ideologies of specularities and voyeurism).

"But the author, certainly in film and television comedy, and I would argue, in comedy in general, is never present to the third person, the addressee, in the same way as they might be, for instance, in cabaret or, indeed, in everyday life, where the teller of the joke is visible to the audience. The author, in comedy, is a position in the text, constructed in phantasy by the spectator. The author as such is absent."<sup>292</sup>

As Weber points out, and in this he follows Freud's own admission, in all potential joke-situations

"the third person, as listener, decides whether or not the joke is successful - i.e. whether it is a joke or not - and thus, whether or not the first person really is a first person, an ego, the author, or at least the teller of a true joke."<sup>293</sup> (original emphasis)

This seems to be the more strongly the case in films.

One attempt to transpose Freudian joke/comic structures to specifically filmic comedicity has been that of Jean-Paul Simon.<sup>294</sup> Though Simon's approach is overly structuralist and tends to neglect the 'reception' end of comedicity, he does suggest filmic equivalents to Freud's joke- and comic structures. The "film esprit" (joke-film) depends on play at the level of signification (playful deconstruction?) which creates a marked second-person position within the text, allowing the viewer a third-person position. The "film comique" places the viewer in an unproblematic (?) spectatorial position in relation to an "objet comique".

It appears that we may be at liberty to interpret as 'visual/situational jokes' a number of elements in film/TV which Freud would never have recognized as jokes. I propose to apply Freud's insights into psychic processes to instances in Monty Python films where some form of joke-technique is used; I expect in particular to find examples of 'faulty reasoning'/nonsense, 'representation by the

opposite',<sup>295</sup> and 'allusion'.<sup>296</sup> These are in fact types which come under the general heading of 'indirect representation',<sup>297</sup> and it is easy to foresee, for instance, that in the Monty Python films we shall find many 'allusory' (nudge-nudge) joke situations. Given the empirical audience-based nature of the work which I propose to do on Meaning of Life, however, it is not at this stage clear how relevant these distinctions will be.

An interesting subdivision of Freud's 'indirect representation' is that of representation by the small or very small. For Freud the crucial point here is the linking of the very small to the "tendency to economy", giving rise to allusion through metonymy. It is rather strange that he neglects the importance of exaggeration (towards 'more', 'bigger') in joke-technique and considers it almost exclusively in relation to the 'comparison with others' which he sees as central to 'the comic'. He briefly considers 'overstatement',<sup>298</sup> as a subdivision of 'representation by the opposite', but does not seem to consider that exaggeration is a form of overstatement! Eastman, on the other hand, does not refer to the joke/comic distinction, but sees a close relation between understatement and exaggeration:

"It is only when putting it mildly is not quite putting it at all that this becomes funny ... it is only when exaggeration goes beyond some humanly reasonable bounds that it makes you want to laugh."<sup>299</sup>

A tentative suggestion can be made that a common device in Monty Python films is the simultaneous use of understatement (representation by the small or very small)<sup>300</sup> and exaggeration, resulting in a sense of incongruity/disorientation (cf. pg.72 above). Thus in the 'First Zulu War' episode of Meaning of Life, Perkins' leg is supposed to have been bitten off by a mosquito (exaggeration) but he

and the other officers treat it as just a scratch (understatement). In Monty Python and the Holy Grail Launcelot's (exaggerated) butchery as he arrives at the 'damsel's' castle is offset by his subsequent apologies ("sorry ... just got carried away"). This may be an interesting avenue to explore when we look at the film(s) more closely.

A second area of study, less immediately relevant here, links back with some of the Elias, Dolto and Laporte material discussed above (pp.26 & 43 ff.). At that point we identified the family as instrumental in articulating a set of ideologies about excrement, hygiene, cleanliness, togetherness, which were/are broadly supportive of a Western capitalist social formation. This function has been identified one way or another in a number of strands of film study, perhaps less so in work on comedy. The family and its ideological complexities are important determinants of melodrama, for example. Robin Wood identifies the repression at the heart of the family institution; he refers to the family as

"... the central medium for the transmission and perpetuation of neurosis in our culture ... that hotbed of neurosis on which our civilization is founded."<sup>301</sup>

Mick Eaton also points to the importance of the family in comedic representation, specifically in situation comedy; Wood, however, points more directly in his piece towards the way in which the 'family comedy' is a return of the repressed through the comedic. Behind this general formulation of repression, however, lie a number of broadly sexual modalities (excremental, aggressive, sadistic, oral, identity/role, relation to father/Law/mother) the relation of which to the comedic in film is an area which has hitherto hardly been touched.

The third area to be considered here is one which has produced a great deal of earnest debate in general, though again relatively little work has been done in relation to the comedic. We have already touched upon the ways in which a refusal to play the symbolic game, particularly in childhood but also in cultural artefacts insofar as repressions/inhibitions engendered in childhood rarely disappear completely, can be used to 'fight' dominant models of socialisation. For Steve Neale, joking itself can be part of a deconstructing process:

"Insofar as any code specifies a syntagmatic and paradigmatic order, insofar as any code thus specifies also a set of relations between a series of signifiers and a series of signifieds within a particular discursive field (fashion, decorum, story-telling, cinema, whatever), then any code can be subject to the process of joking, to the disruption and rearticulation of those orders and relations."<sup>302</sup>

We are reminded of Simon's identification (pg.152 above) of the "film esprit" as a cinematic equivalent of Freud's joke-form. Again though the proviso has to be made that the usefulness of deconstruction of this kind is heavily dependent on its interaction with the particular narrative organization, with the institutional and viewing contexts.

Which kinds of comedic texts are most likely to prove effective in problematising the process of symbolisation and the viewing subject's positionality with respect to ideology? Chaplin (in about 1935) may have been of the opinion that

"humour is a premise ... acquiescence in everything disintegrating. Knocking everything down. Annihilating everything ... they haven't any attitude. It's up to date, of course - a part of the chaos. I think it's transitional."<sup>303</sup>

Gerald Mast seems to reduce the function of the comedic in a 'comedy' (as opposed to its function in otherwise non-comedy films)

to a rendering of the themes/actions of the film onto a "worthless" level, so that the unreal nature of what is happening in the narrative is highlighted,

"... leaving the intellect free to perceive the issues of the work ..."<sup>304</sup>

The comedic is thus seen as specifically and fundamentally Brechtian,<sup>305</sup> and Chaplin seems for Mast to be more Brechtian than Godard. This kind of view appears to follow on from Bergson's thesis that the comedic belongs to the realm of the intellect and not to that of 'the feelings'. There is no room for the unconscious, and no apparent awareness of the ways in which filmic images and narratives are themselves constructions and articulations of various ideologies which as a rule precisely make the unreality and the constructedness of the images invisible. We have argued above in the 'Social Functions' section that the comedic does function far more often in collusion with these naturalising ideologies than against them.

A more useful springboard for looking at types of deconstructive comedy has been suggested by John Ellis. He suggests that there seem to be

"... two kinds of comedy: first that which is aware of language and works by deconstructing and recombining it, the comedy of gags, of illogicality and incongruity; and second that which rests on a natural language, and instead deals with social disruption."<sup>306</sup>

Ellis does not discuss the theoretical/ideological/political significance of deconstruction, but his piece is useful in furnishing examples of films which operate in each of the two ways he suggests. Thus while the films of Ealing or of Preston Sturges tend to be "comedies of social disruption", the films of Chaplin, the Marx

brothers or Frank Tashlin tend (for Ellis at least) towards the illogicality and incongruity which potentially throw language into crisis; again we can note the resemblance that these two categories bear to Simon's film-comique and film-esprit.<sup>307</sup> Whilst Ellis was obviously concerned mainly with Ealing Studios, his distinction can readily be extrapolated, and it is evident that the Monty Python films would fall squarely into his "deconstruction" camp, with the frequent fragmentation of narrative, the foregrounding of illusory naturalism, the reappearance of the same actors in two or more roles, the use of surreal images and linguistic associations.

The above strategies are also those used in

"... those texts which use the mechanisms of comedy to problematise the Law itself, and the narrative mode generally adopted to articulate its inscription."<sup>308</sup>

Neale's concern being the Brechtian project of defamiliarising capitalist relations. Neale's examples, The House on Trubnaya Square, Happiness, Tout Va Bien etc. are all what might (unpejoratively) be called 'serious' comedies, and though the objective which he describes is a good one to keep in view, it remains significant that we shall here be dealing with more 'ludic' material. We return, significantly and appropriately, to the unanswered question of whether deconstruction through the Monty Python version of absurdity, through the generation of "sense in nonsense", through the attempted fracturing of dominant modes of symbolisation and return to pre-symbolic infantile 'play', constitutes such a use of comedy "to defamiliarise capitalist social relations."

3.

Terry Gilliam: Domestication of the grotesque

This section was originally designed to include some remarks about notions of censorship in regard to the sexual and the violent, a short account of some historical and institutional determinants of the Monty Python phenomenon, and some notes on the biographical aspects of individual Pythons most relevant to our grotesque/excremental concerns.<sup>1</sup> In the event, it has only been possible to retain the briefest of discussions of Terry Gilliam, the member of the group whose concerns have been most explicitly relevant, and whose influence on the development of grotesque/excremental humour in the TV series of 1969-1974 was arguably crucial. Much of the fascinating material about Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin will thus not appear here.

Terry Gilliam came to Great Britain in 1967 and, after working for a few months as a freelance illustrator, approached John Cleese to ask if there was a chance of his working in television. Cleese put Gilliam in touch with Humphrey Barclay:

"I looked at all his drawings - they were very grotesque, but being a cartoonist myself I was intrigued by them. We all got to know him - I remember writing letters to protect him from being drafted into the American Army, because we felt that we wanted him around."<sup>2</sup>

In 1968 Barclay moved from the defunct Associated Rediffusion to LWT. One of his first productions for this channel was We Have Ways Of Making You Laugh, on which Gilliam was invited to appear as a quick-sketch artist, and on which he also (accidentally) began his animation career:



"... I suggested I make an animated film ... they assumed I knew how to make animated films, and I assumed they knew I didn't know ... anyway, I did one, and they really liked it, and said 'Do another one'. And so overnight I became an animator on national television!"<sup>3</sup>

This was followed by work on series 2 of Do Not Adjust Your Set (transmitted from February 1969) and on ITV's The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine.

At this stage Gilliam's new-found talent and success with animation owed much to his use of the cheaper and quicker-to-use paper cut-outs which eliminated the need to draw out each frame separately. He seemed to develop a 'feel' for this kind of work and quickly became proficient. It seems, however, that the simplicity of the technique compared with conventional animation later became a source of frustration:

"... it was getting tiresome, because it wasn't fresh for me any more. The limitations of the technique were getting boring, and I just wasn't willing to do proper animation - I just don't have the patience for it."<sup>4</sup>

and was instrumental in hastening his move into directing films with flesh-and-blood actors.

It appears that Terry Gilliam was brought into the Monty Python team by Eric Idle, whom he knew from Do Not Adjust Your Set. His influence was immediate, and Roger Wilmut identifies one particular cartoon which may have exerted a great effect on the group's style. His description of the cartoon is worth quoting in full.

"A clinical description of the cartoon serves only to underline its oddity: a man who ignores a sign saying 'Beware of Elephants' is crushed by a falling elephant; his head, left sticking out of the ground, is kicked around by a football team whose heads gradually join his in bouncing around. These heads then recede until they become mere specks of dirt, part of an advertisement for soap powder presented by an animated Enoch Powell. A white sheet, held up by Powell,

becomes the scene of gunfire between a fort and a man on a horse; this gunfire perforates the packet of soap powder, which falls like snow - and in fact becomes snow - a snow-covered scene complete with a stagecoach. An outlaw holds up the coach, but on his demand 'Hands Up!' he is squashed flat by a huge hand coming out of the coach."<sup>5</sup>

The cartoon is clearly littered with cultural references (a 'beware of' sign, a game of football, advertising, a politician, a conventional scene of conflict in a 'Western' setting) but is equally clearly also a stream of consciousness which could very well be a dream. This is not the place to attempt any kind of psychoanalysis of Gilliam,<sup>6</sup> though it is obvious that childhood events are bound to have exerted an influence on his preoccupations and the forms they take: why the images of fragmented bodies? Why the mutilations and the squashings? Gilliam's own comments are revealing:

"A reaction, he muses, to the stultifying perfection of his adolescent surroundings in California, where 'everything is based on beauty and health, and the abnormal, the ugly, the unpleasant are hidden away.'"<sup>7</sup>

"Very cathartic. Cheaper than psychoanalysis, less dangerous than attacking people on street corners."<sup>8</sup>

In any case the dreamlike stream-of-consciousness technique

"planted in the minds of Palin and Jones the idea that the whole show might be done in a similar manner, with ideas simply flowing on, one to the next, instead of the formalised use of sketches with a beginning, a middle and an end, which had been normal up to then."<sup>9</sup>

and the results are evident in the often surreal organization of much of the TV material in particular. A point of interest, however, is Chapman and Cleese's relative lack of excitement about this kind of comedicity: their preference remained for sketches with 'internal logic'. This resulted, particularly in the TV programmes, in a mixture of surreality, of subversion on this level of signification, and relatively straightforward 'sketch' material, bizarre and tendentious though this latter may sometimes have been. Accord-

ing to Wilmut the reaction of audiences to the early programmes was one of "amused bewilderment". This reminds us of the comments on 'film-jokes' and the film-comic' made above (pg.152) and indicates, if we accept to work with some Freudian notion of joke- and comic structures, that the spectator position in the Monty Python TV programmes is constantly problemalised, oscillating between the 'third person' of the joke in the case of the sur real/deconstructionist material (including most of Gilliam's contributions) and the 'second person' in the case of 'comic' situations which involve humour within a conventional sketch or other structure.

Various sources indicate that Gilliam has been 'influenced' by Bosch, by Breughel, by Magritte, Dali,<sup>10</sup> and Ernst, though Gilliam himself claims to have been unaware of Ernst's work until relatively late in his career. There are references to Merwyn Peake, Lewis Carroll, Jonathan Swift and Fellini and Gilliam's own preferred film-makers include Kurosawa, Bergman, Kubrick, Gance, Welles, Lang. He identifies some innovative (American) 1950s/60s TV work, particularly by Ernie Kovacs, as influential, and cites Buster Keaton's Sherlock Junior as exemplary in foregrounding the image-making process. This latter would again correspond to Jean-Paul Simon's 'film-esprit', with its play on signification:

"un des premiers films ... à présenter ce type de travail, de passage constant de l'énoncé (le déroulement diégétique du film) à l'énonciation (irruption d'autres films dans la diégèse)."11

An example of Gilliam's own creation of this kind of film-joke is the episode towards the end of Monty Python and the Holy Grail in which an animated monster attacks Arthur and the knights in a cave: there is a cut to Gilliam (the creator) sitting at his drawing-

board, suffering a heart-seizure, at which point the monster naturally dies and the knights are saved.<sup>12</sup> Earlier, less inventive examples would include the animation of a man sitting reading (in And Now for Something Completely Different) with the voice-over commentary:

"... in a scene of such spectacular proportions that it could never in your life be seen in a low-budget film like this ... If you've noticed, my mouth isn't moving either."

Gilliam's contributions, then, were critical from the outset of the first TV series. Though his personal on-screen appearances have always been limited to helping out with minor characters.

"... his stream-of-consciousness linking ... together with the sheer savagery of his material, gives the show much of its style."<sup>13</sup>

The 'linking' function, though apparently marginal, was important because it allowed Gilliam a certain autonomy even within the writing-meetings which the other members of the group, being engaged in a common script-writing activity, could not enjoy. He was generally given a starting-point and an end-point for, say, a thirty-second animation link, and left to get on with it:

"Nobody really knew what I was doing until the day of the actual recording - I'd just arrive with a can of film, and present it, and generally it seemed to work."<sup>14</sup>

Gilliam is aware of the degree of unawareness necessary for his type of work:

"... the minute I become aware of what I'm doing I've killed it."<sup>15</sup>

In this he echoes one of Freud's observations on the conditions for the release of the 'comic', the absence of

"... attention ... focused precisely on the comparison from which the comic may emerge. In such circumstances what

would otherwise have the most certain comic effect loses its comic force."<sup>16</sup>

The preference for 'found images', for a more or less disordered image library ("I surround myself with lots of things and I absorb a lot of material, but I don't try to categorise it ... there's a usefulness to keeping them out of order, because as I'm looking for one thing I bump into a lot of other things."<sup>17</sup>) is certainly reminiscent of 1920s/30s surrealist techniques. The 'violence' of removing a picture from one context (be it a 'serious art book' or a sales catalogue) and transplanting it into an entirely unexpected context, the violence inherent in this kind of cut-out/collage work, is thus overlaid in much of Gilliam's work with the more or less unconscious violence which is then done to the picture or image on a diegetic level:

"Gilliam's cartoons are principally noted for their sheer savagery ... and give the show a violent aspect not normally found in a television comedy."<sup>18</sup>

In fact any act of (film-making) montage may be seen in terms of the fragmentation and reassembly of a body, and perhaps Gilliam's work has only made explicit what Jacques Aumont saw as implicit in Eisenstein:

"Each of the Odessa steps is a moment of fracture, punishing and breaking apart the bodies, and in his treatment of the murder in Crime and Punishment, he insists on using the distorted images produced by a wide-angle lens ... It is as if the body (and its forms: the letter, the text, matter) is only there to be murdered, blown up, cut open, broken down, and put together again ... Montage (and demontage, the definitive sadistic operation) is more than a systematic syntagmatic activity, like playing with an erector set, it is concerned with the very body of things. And every body only exists to be cut up."<sup>19</sup>

Both Wilmut and Hewison identify the kinship between the violent animations and Chapman and Cleese's often 'inherently savage'

sketches, and Michael Palin has noted the usefulness of the 'stronger' material:

"The RSPCA or the Royal Society for the Prevention of Arms Coming Off should complain to Terry. His humour does have a savage edge. But I like it, because if we did my stuff all the time, it would be slightly soft."<sup>20</sup>

One of Gilliam's own assessments of this 'violent streak' is at the same time a little simplistic and quite perceptive:

"I try to say it's not me at all, it's the technique - I'm not sure if that's very convincing ... The thing is, because they're cut-outs they're very limited - it's like a Punch and Judy show - the easiest things are violent and sudden things. I have a feeling the technique and I found each other ... I would be working literally seven days a week, and spend at least two nights a week up all night; about two or three in the morning is when it starts happening, and I'm usually very angry at the entire world by then - a lot of pent-up rage comes out."<sup>21</sup>

If the origins of this rage can to some extent in principle be psychologised and situated in a particular sociohistorically defined context, the same can no doubt be said of Gilliam's interest in, indeed fascination with, the mediaeval period. Though at first glance the two areas seem unrelated, the combination of the two is extremely suggestive and returns us to Section 1 of this study and the history of bodily representations, of the ideology of the body. Though his conception of the subject still seems to ignore the importance of historical specificity (pg.150 above), Lacan evokes the area we are in:

"One only has to listen to children aged between two and five playing, alone or together, to know that the pulling off of the head and the ripping open of the belly are themes that occur spontaneously in their imagination, and that this is corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces. We must turn to the work of Hieronymus Bosch for an atlas of all the aggressive images that torment mankind ..."<sup>22</sup>

While Lacan and Gilliam clearly 'inhabit' the 20th Century and the models of the body with which they work are therefore in their different ways products of subject-positions in late-capitalist social formations, nevertheless there is much about Gilliam's apprehension of the mediaeval period - "what excites him are (sic) rich mediaeval images and gothic grotesquerie"<sup>23</sup> - which is highly reminiscent of the mediaeval grotesque body and the material bodily principle which we observed above (pp. 7-12 ff.). Of Breughel and Bosch he has said

"There's great humanity in the paintings - life is just teeming, it's all being lived at an extremely vital level."<sup>24</sup>

One particular statement by Gilliam is particularly explicit and identifies a very conscious desire to resuscitate another kind of physicality:

"It was like the potty-training period of history; with Jabberwocky people got very offended by the scatology - the constant defecation and people peeing off towers, and just the filth. And yet it was like that - I wasn't making anything up. I've got a book called 'Illustrations From the Margins of Illuminated Mediaeval Manuscripts' - and here are all these little monks who have been drawing the Bible, and they put amazing things in the margins. Extraordinary figures - strange mediaeval beasties - but the main thing is that the great majority of the figures seem to be taking a crap! They're just generally showing their bums and sticking their genitalia all over the place - it's very crude and very funny, and I like it. It's always struck me - monks sitting there in these abbeys, doing these holy books, drawing all these dirty drawings! But they weren't dirty drawings - it was just wallowing in the joys of pysicalness, and all the things the body can do."<sup>25</sup> (original emphasis)

This is a beautiful statement identifying the 'lower material bodily stratum' of the mediaeval grotesque, though the exaggeration of "constant" defecation damages Gilliam's credibility slightly. An interesting digression at this point, but one which we may take up again if we look at the scripted 'Adventures of Martin Luther' of The Meaning of Life later, would be to interrogate the position of

monks with respect to anality. In a chapter on Luther's 'Thurmer-lebnis', Norman Brown discusses the fact that Luther was in the 'privy' when he first conceived the '95 Articles', and quotes a passage from Freud:

"Psychoanalysis, alas, cannot agree that it is of no significance that the religious experience which inaugurated Protestant theology took place in the privy. The psychoanalytic theory of infantile sexuality and its sublimation insists that there is a hidden connection between higher spiritual activity and lower organs of the body ... Psychoanalysis has accepted as a demonstrated theorem that a definite type of ethical character, exhibiting a combination of three traits - orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy - is constructed by the sublimation of a special concentration of libido in the anal zone, and it is therefore labelled the anal character."<sup>26</sup>

The limitations of Freud's ahistoricity apart, mediaeval monks would clearly occupy a particular position in relation to mediaeval-grotesque notions of excrement and the body; Luther's own writing may or may not have been typical:

"... the anal character of the Devil is sensuously recorded by Luther (in his 'Table-Talk') with a gross concreteness that latter-day Protestantism cannot imagine and would not tolerate."<sup>27</sup>

The association of the devil (and indeed of the Pope) with shit was certainly not confined to Luther. In his 'Metamorphosis of Ajax', for instance, Sir John Harington, in addition to furnishing a history of toilets, makes a number of references linking bodily function, religion and toilets. Thus we find a drawing of a man on a toilet, attended by the devil, followed by the following poem:

"Mumbled (as was his manner) certain prayers  
And unto him the devil straight repairs!  
And boldly to revile him he begins,  
Alleging that such prayers are deadly sins;  
And that he show'd he was devoid of grace,  
To speak to God from so unmeet a place.  
The reverent man, though at first dismay'd,  
Yet strong in faith, to Satan thus he said:  
thou damned spirit, wicked, false and lying,  
Despairing thine own good, and ours envying;  
Each take his due, and me thou canst not hurt,



to God my prayer I meant, to thee the dirt.  
Pure prayer ascends to him who high doth sit  
Down falls the filth, for fiends of hell more fit."<sup>28</sup>

Terry Gilliam's own fascination with 'dirty doodles' extends to some fascinatingly mangled mutations in his own work.<sup>29</sup> These figures and many of his other creations, in evoking "all the things the body can do", also recall the unlimited mediaeval grotesque body in their refusal to be defined by a unitary psychicality. They also recall for us Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring-machines and the interesting anti-sexual terrorism polemic by Bruckner and Finkielkraut

"A la bipartition classique du haut et du bas, du noble et du bestial, sachons substituer un poudrolement où le sexe, la tête et les bras ne soient chaque fois jamais la même chose ... dégageons-nous de la croyance au fonctionnel, au naturel (la bouche peut être un sexe, le sexe une bouche, le cul machine à avaler ...), et plus de recentrement sur nous mais une partialisation à l'infini. Coupons, coupons dans la belle totalité de l'organisme ..."<sup>30</sup>

Fragmentation can thus be a weapon against the atomisation of the individual in capitalist society:

"Partial objects unquestionably have a sufficient charge in and of themselves to blow up all of Oedipus and totally demolish its ridiculous claims to represent the unconscious."<sup>31</sup>

Crucially - and this is why Terry Gilliam's work is so interesting - this can go together with an evocation of the positive-regenerative aspects of dirt, of shit. This is not to suggest that Gilliam's work is necessarily in any way 'revolutionary', but it may be interesting to compare the way in which his animation works with Eagleton's description of carnival:

"... carnival involves above all a pluralizing and cathecting of the body, dismantling its unity into fresh mobile parts and ceaselessly transgressing its limits. In a collectivising movement, the individuated body is thrown wide open to its social surroundings, so that its orifices become spaces

of erotic interchange with an 'outside' that is somehow also an 'inside' too. A vulgar, shameless materialism of the body - belly, buttocks, anus, genitals - rides rampant over ruling-class civilities; and the return of discourse to this sensuous root is nowhere more evident than in laughter itself, an enunciation that springs straight from the body's libidinal depths."<sup>32</sup>

In the above reference Gilliam speaks particularly of his own film Jabberwocky (1977) and of the "dirtiness" of the period. Though it may have been "mildly over the top excrementally"<sup>33</sup> Gilliam himself feels that

"... there are situations when people are very funny relieving themselves. There's nothing in the film you wouldn't find in a Breughel painting ..."<sup>34</sup>

The question of offence, and of whether the Python team set out, in their TV series and in the films, to shock their audience, is a difficult one. Terry Gilliam was aware of a certain need for challenging/shocking material:

"We've got to maintain a certain level of offence; otherwise we're just entertainers. It's one way of proving to ourselves that we're not just in it for the money."<sup>35</sup>

While implicitly agreeing with this view, John Cleese has said that by the third TV series (first transmitted 19.10.72 - 18.1.73), the quality of the writing had tailed off:

"... in his opinion the search for new ideas was making them thrash about, exploiting the strange and violent rather than the funny."<sup>36</sup>

A substantial audience had, however, become accustomed to the 'violent' sketches (or else the sketches appealed to already-existing sensibilities):

"The intensity of the writing is in many cases matched by a noticeably increased savagery which may partly have spilt over from the cartoons. By now the audiences were used to this sort of thing and ... is typical in being greeted with laughter with no hint of restraint ..."<sup>37</sup>

While Cleese has thus admitted to a tendency to overuse 'shocking material' but has always denied the intention to shock, Graham Chapman has explicitly identified a desire to subvert and to shock:

"I think if the authorities had been aware of what we wanted to do right from the beginning we would never have been allowed to do the programme."<sup>38</sup>

In speaking of Monty Python's Life of Brian he has said

"It's funny ... we don't deliberately go out to offend. Unless we feel its justified. And in the case of certain well-known religious, it was justified."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, an explicit part of Eric Idle's project was the potential role of humour in the breaking of taboos:

"If anything can survive the probe of humour it is clearly of value, and conversely all groups who claim immunity from laughter are claiming special privileges which should not be granted."<sup>40</sup>

Finally, an apparent 'joke' remark, made by Idle about the difficulties of early audience reactions on the Pythons' first North American tour:

"... that's the reason we all got into the business in the first place ... to find something so funny that nobody dares laugh."<sup>41</sup> (original emphasis)

Grotesque and Excremental Humour:  
Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

Volume II of 3 Volumes

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## Volume II

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4.

Psychosociological models and methodologies: preparation for audience research.

The following is an account of work-in-progress aimed at developing a methodology suitable for studying audience response to the grotesque/excremental/violent/absurd comedic elements of our Monty Python film. Though it may become clear that some strands of the research material studied are not particularly relevant, at this stage I shall try to give a more or less complete account of what I have found thus far.

"It is to the highest degree probable that the subject's ... general attitude of mind is that of ready complacency and cheerful willingness to assist the investigator in every possible way by reporting to him those very things which he is most eager to find, and that the very questions of the experimenter ... suggest the shade of reply expected. Indeed ... it seems too often as if the subject were now regarded as a stupid automaton."<sup>1</sup>

The necessarily incomplete survey of the research literature which I have so far conducted reveals a reluctance on the part of many workers in the field (at least until the 1970's) to engage fully with Freudian-based notions of humour<sup>2</sup> or the comedic ("the psychoanalytic terminology is not generally accepted").<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless most of those studies can be read across the following evaluation, part axiomatic, part hypothetical:

"In enjoying themes of repressed behaviour, the audience's problem is not to fool others about his motives but to fool the self. Moralistic self-censorship prevents the conscious enjoyment of themes of repressed motivation. It appears ... that the pleasure provided by the incongruous form of jokes distracts attention from a full awareness of their taboo content ... The funniness provided by tendentious content is inversely related to the audience's awareness of its presence and nature."<sup>4</sup>

Much of the survey which follows will be concerned with the assertions in the second part of this quote, and in the context of our own research we shall want to look at what kinds of 'repressed behaviours' can form the basis for comedic enjoyment, and why such comedy sometimes does not work!

"Kris suggested (1952) that when impulse humour 'falls flats' and the intendedly humorous material evokes discomfort or disgust instead of humorous pleasure, it is because internal inhibitions have impeded impulse expression."<sup>5</sup>

We can note in passing that, though we shall be concerned primarily with 'discomfort or disgust', there is another mode of 'coping' with threatening material, an alternative to the flight into repression. This alternative is a bluff investigative/intellectualising strategy, identified among others by Donn Byrne.<sup>6</sup> It will not be of much (immediate) relevance here, but it constitutes an echo of our own work on anxiety above (pg.77), of Ferenczi's remarks about the anal-economical origins of thought processes, and of Constance Penley's comments on epistemophilia.

Two general problems with this stage of the research should be referred to at the outset. The necessary incompleteness mentioned above is of course due largely to the bewildering volume of (more or less) relevant literature and to the lack of time at my disposal, but another point is the unavailability of some of the (most interesting) sources.<sup>7</sup> Some numbers of apparently anodyne periodicals appear simply not to exist in the libraries I have consulted (including the British Library!), whilst others are housed on microfilm in American research Institutes.

The second problem is more substantial, but certainly not insuperable. Very little of the detailed audience-based psychosociological research done on comedy or humour has included cinematic comedicity, and certainly not in its specificity (cf. pg.152 above for some reference to Jean-Paul Simon's work on cinematic equivalents to Freudian notions of 'joke' and 'comic' forms). The main exception I have found is Vincent Nowlis,<sup>8</sup> who has described various experiments by himself and by others on the ways in which films (frequently extracts) can affect subject performance on Mood Adjective Checklists (more of these below!). The fact that Nowlis' work - in this respect at least - is not of especial interest is significant; our quest at this stage is for theoretically adequate ways of 'measuring' response to comedic stimulus, and of 'measuring' something about the disposition of the subject (before and/or after exposure) in relation to a hostility/anxiety/sexuality/anality complex. The specificity of the Monty Python film will, of course, influence the form of the ultimate measuring devices, but at this stage there is a prior set of methodological choices to be made.

Between this introduction and the conclusion to the section there will be three central parts. The first of these will deal with the above-mentioned measurement, initially in general terms then in terms of specific techniques. The central and most bulky part will be concerned with "quantifying Freud", with quantifying amusement/appreciation of humour in relation to quantified anxiety, inhibitions, hostility ... This will be followed by a section discussing some of the problems thrown up by the research, and by a brief conclusion.



#### 4.1 Measurement

There exists in the literature a certain tension between two modes of observation, two ways of gaining access to some kind of measurement of variables such as anxiety-levels and amusement.

The less favoured of these is the behaviourist approach, which would seek to link appreciation of a joke, say, to objectively observable changes in the subject's demeanour. These may be laughter, smiling, or some other change in facial expression,<sup>9</sup> or they be less visible but no less 'measurable' changes such as skin temperature, electrical potential, or pulse rate. Where such methods have been employed they have rarely been used without resort to other, corroborative, methods.

The other, much more favoured, mode involves 'self-reporting', the assessment of experience (in a 'primary' instance at least) by the experimental subject her/himself. Chris Wilson's anti-behaviourist polemic unearths as many problems as it obliterates:

"It seems perverse and illogical to reject experience as problematic and concentrate on objective data, as do the behaviourists."<sup>10</sup>

"... neither can be measured objectively, for both are registered and monitored in the experience of the experimenter."<sup>11</sup>

and betrays a blind-spot the origins of which (idealism of experience-as-transparent or careless thinking?) are of no concern here:

"Only when psychology dispenses with psychologists can it become an 'objective' science."<sup>12</sup>

Who would replace the psychologists? Still, granted that

"intuitively, we know that jokes may be appreciated below the threshold for overt expression."<sup>13</sup>

it does seem right to give at least heuristic priority to experience and to go along with the assertion that

"experimental findings indicate that self-report is more valid and reliable than behavioural or physiological data." ... "Apparently, ratings are a more consistent and reliable measure of humorous responsiveness than expressive behaviour. The choice of self-report as dependent variable seems well vindicated."<sup>14</sup>

Support for this view comes from, among others, Walter O'Connell and Martin Orne. In commenting on his use of a 0-4 scale in the Wit and Humour Appreciation Test (WHAT), O'Connell writes

"The rationale for such a scale of preferences comes from psychoanalytic studies of wit and humour that regard 'implicit laughter' and appreciation as the key response, rather than more overt measures."<sup>15</sup>

Martin Orne's preference is for post-experimental interviews;<sup>16</sup> the major difficulties of such a technique will be considered in the 'problems' section below. It does appear that some form of self-reporting method will have to be developed for the Monty Python research, just possibly supported by some more or less crude behavioural observation (e.g. laughter, facial expressions). If such a combination of methods is used, it will have also to be remembered that, as Young and Frye have found, the overt laughter-response and covert amusement-ratings are probably not affected by the nature of the social situation in the same way;<sup>17</sup> the indications are that laughter, a social response, is facilitated by group situations whereas private written appreciations are not significantly affected by such a variation in the experimental context.

Self-reporting, then, is used to try to assess something about the perception of comedic elements by experimental subjects. This something is amusement, funniness, humorous appreciation, and it

seems that these terms can be used more or less interchangeably. It is important to note that the reporting of the amusement or the appreciation should be private/anonymous, particularly in the absence of adequate monitoring of group interactions.

"To the extent that we actually were successful in minimising subjects' real or imaginary perception of external social pressures, it seems reasonable to interpret the results in terms of intrapsychic defence processes."<sup>18</sup>

The question of how it is possible to 'know' how successful this kind of enterprise 'really' is, and of subjects' attitudes to assurances of anonymity are real and should be looked at; we shall however accept at this stage that private self-reporting methods, as well as being susceptible to close experimental control, are likely to give more readily usable results.

Let us now look at some of the specific techniques which have developed in and around this field. The first two sub-sections will look at some ways of measuring perceived funniness, amusement etc., and the sub-sections c) to f) will be concerned with measurement/definition of personality traits related to anxiety, hostility, sexuality etc. The final sub-sections will point towards some additional methodological aids.

a) Mirth Response Test

It seems that procedures for designing and carrying out experiments on humour-appreciation were elaborated by Cattell and Luborsky (1947) and by Redlich, Levine and Sohler (1951).<sup>19</sup> There are two references to the apparently definitive Redlich Levine and Sohler work which point to a problem typical in this field:

"In a recent psychoanalytically oriented approach to the study of humour, Redlich, Levine and Sohler (1951) developed the Mirth Response Test."<sup>20</sup>

"Two existing tests have attracted considerable interest as research tools in the field of the comic but neither follow the Freudian paradigm of humour ..."<sup>21</sup>

This is symptomatic of much of the literature in that where psychoanalytic/Freudian notions of psychic economy/repression are mobilized, this is far from always in conjunction with an adequate theorisation of the psychoanalysis of the different comedic tropes of wit, the comic, and humour.

It is thus not entirely clear what is specific to the Mirth Response Test. Direct and indirect references to it are scattered around the literature, and Strickland and Doris and Fierman in particular have acknowledged its use, though many other pieces of work are obviously derived from the concept.

"The test consists of a series of cartoons that have been rated by judges along the dimensions of aggression, sex, and nonsense. From a subject's ratings of the humorousness of each cartoon, his score on these three components can be obtained."<sup>22</sup>

Defined in this way, the MRT is a flexible tool, but this flexibility is perforce accompanied by a number of problems. Several research accounts are at pains to describe how the "judges" were teachers/professors of psychology (or at the very least students specialising in such a subject area!) (hence "experts") and how elaborate and stringent selection tests were applied to the humorous instances so that only those cartoons/jokes which were more or less unanimously selected as belonging to a desired category were included in the study. What assumption does such a preselection by 'experts' make about those experts' impartiality or humour preferences? How are the dimensions of aggression, sex and nonsense to be

defined? The humour-appreciation can be on one of a variety of scales: Strickland used a "15-point graphic scale that ranged from not funny to extremely funny",<sup>23</sup> whilst Byrne<sup>24</sup> was not alone in using a 4-point scale. What are the rationales for different sorts of scale? These kinds of questions will permeate much of what follows. The question of what happens to the MRT if we branch out from 'cartoons' leads us to WHAT.

b) Wit and Humour Appreciation Test

We have noted O'Connell's observation that the MRT as developed by Redlich, Levine and Sohler failed to engage with Freudian notions of humour. Consequently, for his own project

"... a Wit and Humour Appreciation Test was developed around forms of jests that follow deductions from psychoanalytic theory."<sup>25</sup>

Though O'Connell's conception of 'humour' is rather vague (and in my view erroneous) and its use is complicated by the seemingly unacknowledged use of violent/hostile elements in certain instances of 'humour', WHAT does at least put the distinction between wit/jest/jokes and other comedic forms on the agenda. Bearing in mind also Jean-Paul Simon's distinction between film-jokes and the film-comic, this may prove useful.

The work of Earl Dworkin and Jay Efran,<sup>26</sup> though not citing any method as a direct source, contains elements which place it closer to WHAT than to MRT; in its eschewing of individual jokes or instances of wit it is perhaps an example of HAT! A selection of solo album tracks by various comedians were presented as instances of 'humour' and subjects were asked to respond not to individual

jokes but to the humorous track as a whole. This in itself constitutes a departure from the simple cartoons or jokes used in MRT's. Another distinction with respect to MRT (though also to O'Connell's WHAT) is the oral delivery of the comedic material. Whilst this is of interest because it suggests that determinants such as voice inflection, timing and 'performance' also need to be taken into account in oral (hence filmic) humour, Dworkin and Efran seem unfortunately not to have considered these implications of their choice of material.

c) Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs)

A method for determining personality tendencies through the themes perceived by subjects in (usually) images was originally developed by Henry A. Murray<sup>27</sup> but was soon adopted, adapted and improved, and before long became a very common projective technique, recently much used in conjunction with Rorschach tests. The basic method consisted of showing a subject one or several pictures of more or less narrative potential, and posing a series of questions to prompt the construction of a story around the picture(s). An example would be a line-drawings of two figures lying on the ground, with the questions "Who are the people in the picture?", "Where are they?", "What brings them here?", "What happened next?" initiating the construction of a narrative. The possibility of variations in technique is obvious and clearly constructive: subject responses may be written, and the experiment may be audio- or video-recorded. There is great scope for inventiveness in selection of pictures and of prompting-questions for work on specific aspects of personality.

As Gardner Lindzey notes,<sup>28</sup> practitioners of TATs tended to become cut off from the debates happening in the mainstream of psychology and psychoanalysis, and certain assumptions underlying the validity of TAT became axiomatised: conclusions and extrapolations from TATs consequently ran the risk of being psychologically/theoretically invalid, and if we are to contemplate using any variant of TAT in assessing subject attitudes to (say) aggressivity, absurdity, excrement than it is important to be aware of what the risks are.

One particular assumption identified by Lindzey is that other related personality traits can generally be inferred from visibly projected material. At this point (and this may be an unfair appraisal based on insufficient information) suspicions begin to form about the notions of 'personality' being deployed. Underpinning TAT seems to be an idea of personality as consisting of traits and facets which can be observed more or less clearly by control of the (image) environment, but which are basically static; an individual can be defined, fixed, if a skilful reading is made of the symptoms revealed in the TAT. No doubt work has been done with TAT on personality change, but it seems at this stage that the Mood Adjective Checklist which we shall look at in the next subsection may be a more flexible, less problematic device. Nevertheless, seen in a non-programmatic light, Murray's original conception of TAT can certainly look attractive:

"(His) instruments typically do not limit the response alternatives of the subject by means of pre-determined categories but rather they permit and encourage a full and subjective exposition on the part of the subject. Imagination and fantasy are permitted full participation by these techniques. They provide the investigator with a fullness of data that

is at the same time richly promising and complexly discouraging."<sup>29</sup>

Attempts have been made to control the disheartening complexity of open-ended TAT data, particularly by replacing open-ended questions such as "how do you think this person feels?" with structured multiple-choice answers designed to reveal specific character traits. One such attempt is that of George Stricker,<sup>30</sup> whose Objectively Scorable Apperception Test (OAT) proposed description of slides/images which were structured in the dimensions of aggression, rejection, insecurity, dependency, and 'neutral'(?). Leaving aside the origins/rationale of these particular categories, a major problem must be how to ensure that the images are 'equipotential' for the five (perhaps four non-neutral) response types, that a particular image does not by some semantic suggestion favour, say, a response indicating projected 'insecurity'. In Stricker's words,

"The effort to ensure that the response options were equipotential for choice increased the likelihood that the eventual rank ordering, since the test is of adequate reliability, would largely be the product of a projective process."<sup>31</sup>

The effort was doubtless made and the likelihood of validity was no doubt increased, but an adequate solution and a complete equipotentiality seem impossible given the polysemy of any image over and above the personality make-up of any notional spectator. It must not be overlooked that the same problem exists also with the original TAT, where even a simple line drawing can favour a certain interpretation by deployment of subtle cultural codes.

Stricker used aggression-inducing film to test the validity of



his pre- and post-aggressed OAT scores. He did this by seeking correlation with scores obtained using MACLs.

d) Blacky Test

O'Connell refers to a device for identifying areas of psychosexual anxiety called the Blacky Test. This was developed in 1950 by G.S. Blum,<sup>32</sup> and a description of its use is furnished by one of his research students, Esther Frankel.

Though it is difficult, without a great deal more detailed research, to compare the sketchy accounts available of precisely how the two methods function, it seems that TAT and the Blacky Test both use series of potentially narrativistic pictures to elicit responses from the subject, and clearly both aim at insight into the subject's 'personality'.

The Blacky Test is designed to identify effective disturbances of a sexual nature. The six aspects of sexuality which are identified are of classical Freudian origin: oral eroticism, oral sadism, oral sadism (including expulsiveness and retentiveness), Oedipal intensity, castration anxiety/penis envy, and narcissistic/anacletic love-object.

While in the TAT 'line-drawings' (of unspecified subject-matter) are always referred to, it appears that the Blacky Test (originally at least) was more standardised:

"12 cartoon drawings depict either a stage of sexual development or a type of object relationship within that develop-

ment in the life of a dog named Blacky ... Supporting characters are mama, papa, and Tippy, a sibling figure."<sup>33</sup>

Responses to these cartoons could then be used to determine the degree of subject disturbance in the above sexual areas.

While in the light of more recent developments in psychoanalytic theory, we may wish to question the original categories (male eroticism etc.), the Blacky Test is, in its relative 'simplicity', an attractive tool. The simplicity is, however, deceptive. It should perhaps be no surprise that Frankel gives no detail of precisely how anxieties in the various sexual areas are inferred from subject responses to the pictures of dogs; presumably a more than passing acquaintance with analysis is required in order that one may make the necessary interpretations! It does seem that the idea of using either TAT or the Blacky Test in the current research may be a little too ambitious.

e) Mood Adjective Checklists (MACLs)

Around 1957 Vincent Nowlis and Russell Green (op. cit.) were responsible for developing a method for constructing 'mood' profiles of individual subjects. The technique consisted essentially of asking subjects to assess their feelings at the moment they read each of a number (usually between 30 and 120) of adjectives describing mood, scoring their response on a 4-point scale of "definitely", "slightly", "unclear or don't know", or "no". Instructions generally included "work rapidly ... Your first reaction is best."<sup>34</sup>

At first sight this certainly looks like an attractive tool, not least because

"... in everyday situations the individual may be disposed to express verbally only one aspect of mood, but the MACL attempts to elicit within a very short period verbal behaviour that applies to many aspects of mood."<sup>35</sup>

Nowlis is at pains to stress that simplicity both of test format and instruction are essential, also that a wide range of adjectives covering a variety of 'moods' is preferable to a limited selection, even if the object of study is, say, hostility. The test appears quick and efficient. A further virtue may be its non-interference with other variables, though Wilson is less sure of this:

"This process of reporting drive may, though, reduce the very motives it measures. Singer (1968) observed such an effect, and discarded the humour ratings of subjects who had completed a checklist before receiving the humour."<sup>36</sup>

The reference to 'reporting drive' brings us to a more problematic (but essential) aspect of the MACL, namely its organization - at least in its original form - around a set of bipolar dimensions: as usual one can enquire where these dimensions came from! They were activation/deactivation, pleasantness/unpleasantness, positive social orientation/negative social orientation, and control/lack of control, and in the initial versions of the MACL 129 adjectives corresponding to these eight categories were chosen, together with ten others the function of which was to monitor attitudes to the test and to monitor 'other feelings'.<sup>37</sup>

When subject responses to the MACL were subjected to statistical analysis, twelve 'factors' were identified around which the responses appeared to be structured. What was interesting, however, was that there was no statistical evidence of the bipolar attribution of checklist words to 'opposite' adjectives within any one

'factor'. Thus the subjects who marked themselves as "happy" did not necessarily also circle "not sad"; "not anxious" did not correspond to "relaxed". What are we to make of this? Certainly it seems that

"... it suggests that aspects of mood commonly believed to be interdependently opposed to each other may be functionally independent."<sup>38</sup>

While this may indeed be true, at least part of the problem must also be the imperfect polarities of the words actually chosen/used to describe elements of mood. Words are always impure, subject to a degree of confusion, and other words could always have been used. Indeed, and this is a point not mentioned by Nowlis in this piece, the adjectives must be chosen for their comprehensibility for a particular set of subjects: what would most British subjects now make of a descriptor such as 'clutched up'? Ideally the adjectives would need to be pre-tested to ensure their 'legibility'.

Nevertheless two of the 'factors' identified by Nowlis may be useful to us. The factors of 'anxiety' and 'aggression' were both attended by relatively high statistical significance in the way responses to words such as fearful, jittery, startled, clutched up, shocked, helpless, weak, downhearted, insecure, frustrated (in the case of 'anxiety') were distributed. Other sets of anxiety-related adjectives which Nowlis notes as having been used in MACL research are tense, nervous, shaky, on edge,<sup>39</sup> afraid, desperate, fearful, frightened, nervous, panicky, shaky, tense, terrified, upset, worrying.<sup>40</sup> In addition to this, Cattell and Scheier<sup>41</sup> noted that the following self-report variables were loaded on 'anxiety': higher willingness to admit common failings, higher susceptibility to annoyance, lower ego-strength, less confidence in untried perfor-

mance, lower self-sentiment, higher ergic tension. If one of our hypotheses is that grotesque/excremental humour can function to release anal tension/anxiety but that in instances where it is rejected and found unfunny anxiety in relation to anality may be increased, then subject responses to adjectives such as those listed above before and after an instance of grotesque/excremental humour could well furnish interesting evidence.

In fact there are several instances of films (either whole or in extract form) having been used in before-and-after MACL experiments. Thus Pomeranz (cf. footnote 7 above) used film of a sinus operation to induce anxiety to enable him to compare before-and-after MACL responses. Other films which have been used to investigate clusters of adjectives (Nowlis' 'factors') include Harold Lloyd's The Freshman, Bunuel's Los Olvidados, a film from Hitchcock's TV series, and The Oxbow Incident, High Noon, A Walk in the Sun, and documentaries on the Nurenberg Trials and on Corn Farming in Iowa.<sup>42</sup> It is significant, however, that in all of these instances the film material was used in the course of research on MACLs, their development and validity. My interest, on the other hand, would be in using MACLs in order to elaborate how a particular film (or extract) works; the process would in effect be turned on its head. Nowlis' own concluding remarks are a useful relativisation of the MACL method:

"... I cannot, however, recommend that it be used as the primary or sole index of the dependent variable or variables in a study ... Yet like change in atmospheric pressure in the prediction of weather, that which is trivial in one way may incidentally be tied in with so many co-varying phenomena that it can be put to important but limited use."<sup>43</sup>

f) Self-Activity Inventory (SAI) and Self-Ideal (SI) scores

O'Connell also used a device for measuring 'adjustment', which he took to be inversely related to repression. The rationale for the Inventory is that

"... tension is experienced when a person is aware of the discrepancy between his self-concept and his ideal concept."<sup>44</sup>

so that it can be predicted that

"... the greater the discrepancy (high S-I score) the greater the anxiety or tension experienced. A number of studies have indicated that the S-I score is inversely related to the level of adjustment and of stress tolerance, and significantly correlated with psychometric tests of anxiety."<sup>45</sup>

The notion of a quantitative score for self-image/ideal image discrepancy is an intriguing one, but unfortunately O'Connell does not elaborate on precisely how the scores were obtained; his results also led him to question the assumption that high S-I discrepancies necessarily correlated with repression or maladjustment in any straightforward way. In his concluding remarks he concedes that very low S-I scores could still be accompanied by extremes of repression.

g) Ipsative Scores

The above use of self-concept as a yardstick for measurement is a stepping-stone to the idea of ipsative scoring, in which each subject becomes her/his own control and scores are 'internally' standardized.

A major problem in much psychosociological research is the selection of valid control conditions: if a statistically signifi-

cant change in anxiety-score is observed for a sample of subjects who have viewed, say, a slapstick comedy film, it is necessary to ascertain whether the change has been due to the film, to some other experimental effect, or to extrinsic/random causes. Since any experiment can only ever actually be performed once<sup>46</sup> (next time it will be with 'different' subjects, at a different point in time/history, the manipulation of the variables can never be completely replicated etc.), the usual practice is to select a 'parallel' group of subjects with whom an identical experiment is carried out, but with the variable kept constant. The assumption here is not only that the rest of the experiment can be precisely replicated, but, crucially, that for the purposes of the experiment the control subjects are identical to those in the experimental group.

The alternative to this method is to build the control into the experimental situation for each individual subject by the use of an 'ipsative dependent variable'. Thus in an experiment on the effect of a pause before the punchline on reported amusement,

"... the dependent variable for each subject was: mean rating of experimental jokes minus mean rating of control jokes."<sup>47</sup>

Some form of this method could prove attractive in our later research, not only for theoretical reasons but because of the (likely) limits on numbers of subjects and on the additional personnel necessary for carrying out other forms of control experiments.

#### h) Use of 'observers'

An interesting supplementary device which O'Connell seems to have been one of very few to use is the 'planting' of observers in

the groups of experimental and control subjects.

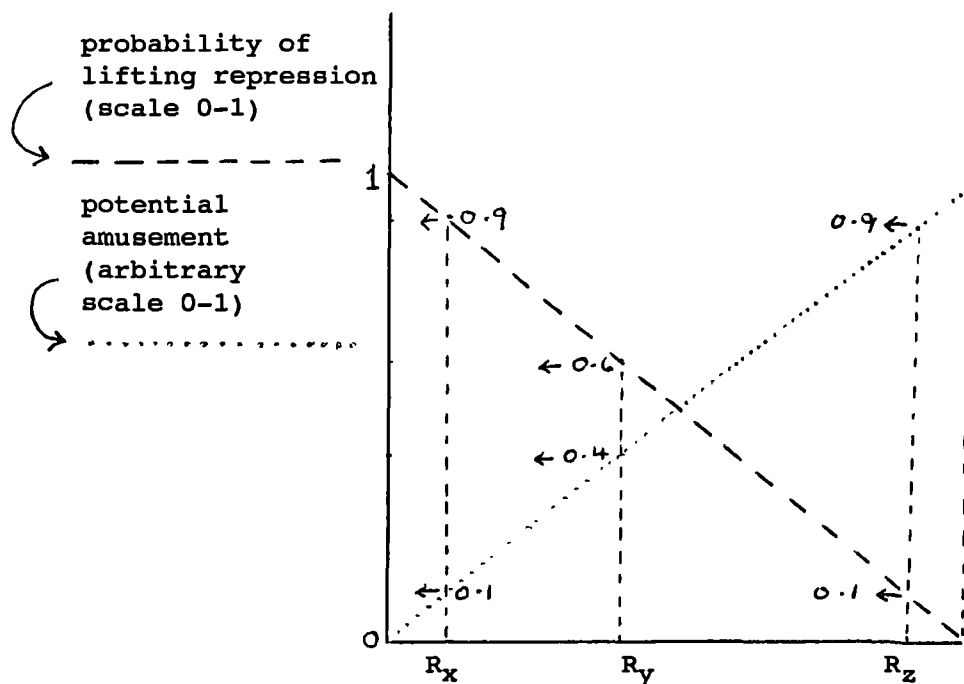
"In order to provide the E with objective evidence of class behaviour to supplement his own observations, eight undergraduate students were asked to observe and note in writing the reactions of the classes. All eight observers were unaware of the purpose of the experiment but concurred unanimously in their views as to the widespread feelings of anxiety and suppressed hostility in these stressed classes."<sup>48</sup>

At the very least such a measure would provide a built-in monitoring device ensuring that the crasser forms of methodological malpractice are avoided!

#### 4.2 The Research

This central sub-section could be entitled 'Quantifying Freud'. Though there can (and should) be no agreement about the unproblematic use of Freudian models, I believe that they do furnish us with a very insightful account of the psychic economy which underpins our appreciation of the comedic in its various forms. As Chris Wilson observes, "Freud's theory implies a quantitative argument",<sup>49</sup> and potential amusement at a comedic element is seen as directly linked to the intensity of repression, the amusement being mediated by the ease of lifting of the repression. The degree of amusement will then increase with the strength of the repression lifted, but since at high levels of repression the lifting is less likely to be effected, the amusement is consequently also less likely. This relation can be represented diagrammatically in the following way:<sup>50</sup>

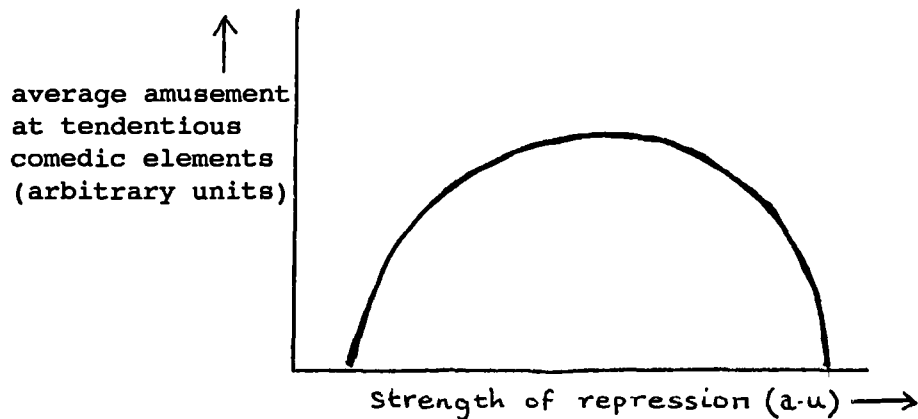




**Fig.2** Diagrammatic representation of the relationship of repression and amusement predicted by Freud's theory.

Given the probability of repression being lifted and the potential amusement consequent on the lifting of repression, it is reasonable to relate these mathematically: the probable (or average) amusement at any particular level or repression is the potential amusement multiplied by the probability of the repression being lifted. Thus at levels of repression  $R_x$  and  $R_z$  the probable amusement would be  $0.9 \times 0.1 = 0.09$  au (arbitrary units), whilst at repression  $R_y$  the probable amusement would be  $0.6 \times 0.4 = 0.24$  au.

This roughly quantitative relation can in turn be shown graphically:



**Fig.3** Strength of repression of drive related to tendentious comedic element (arbitrary units)

so that maximum amusement is achieved at moderate repression levels. At low levels of repression little psychic energy is made available for release through amused response, whilst at high levels of repression the chances of release are low and the large amount of release/amusement which may be effected has to be averaged against the many instances where humorous release will simply not occur.

"Had he been a quantitative theorist, Freud might have proposed the inverted U-shaped relationship of pleasure and activation; as he was not, he simply maintained ... that activation and pleasure were inversely related."<sup>51</sup>

Much of the literature and much of this central section is concerned, in various ways, with validating or with picking holes in the above inverted-U-curve idea, and what follows needs to be read with this in mind. The whole of the section is concerned with amusement as a response to various kinds of comedic stimuli, and with the relation of such amusement to different forms/manifestations of anxiety, repression etc. The subdivision into subsec-

tions is to a large extent a product of how these notions have been studied and written about.

a) Incongruity

We have seen (pp.68-70 above) how writers as disparate as Bergson, Freud and Koestler have in their different ways identified ambiguity, incongruity or conceptual incompatibility as central to the comedic. Wilson also notes this, using the term 'cognitive dissonance':

"Most theorists view the appreciation of humour as involving the re-establishment of cognitive equilibrium."<sup>52</sup>

There are two kinds of question to be addressed. First, is humour necessarily incongruous? Provided we broaden our understanding of 'incongruous' to include 'cognitively dissonant', 'in two different planes', 'in unaccustomed juxtaposition', 'based on a discrepancy in energy-levels', it seems that many humour theorists implicitly assume that some form of incongruity is common to most if not all humour.<sup>53</sup> Research has been carried out on jokes which rely on the juxtaposition of incongruous elements, but the results have been inconclusive. Kenny,<sup>54</sup> for example, found, using tendentious jokes, that self-reported amusement increased with predictability, which would suggest an inverse relationship between degree of amusement and level of incongruity. Godkewitsch,<sup>55</sup> using (relative-ly) non-tendentious material, found that there was an inverse relation between predictability and funniness. Wilson comments that the greater tendentiousness of Kenny's jokes may have overdetermined their predictability and masked response-variations in relation to

incongruity, and finds that in general there is a link between funniness and incongruity:

"This correlation suggests that incongruity co-varies with a determinant of amusement, or is itself a determinant."<sup>56</sup>

The question thus remains an open one.

The second question in relation to incongruity is: is incongruity itself funny? When experimental subjects were asked to lift a series of approximately equal weights and then found that the last weight was much lighter or heavier than expected, it was found<sup>57</sup> that the incongruous final weight almost always produced a laughter response. Nerhardt

"... suggested that laughter has multiple meanings and functions, arguing that laughter without amusement, or the stimulus of incongruity, might reflect friendliness and bonhomie."<sup>58</sup>

In further experiments on incongruity stimuli and funniness ratings Nerhardt found that rated funniness did increase with the level of incongruity, but that beyond a certain point increased incongruity did not produce even higher funniness rating. This was supported by Ertel,<sup>59</sup> who seems to have found an absurdity/funniness relation strikingly reminiscent of the inverted U-shaped curve of Fig.3 above.

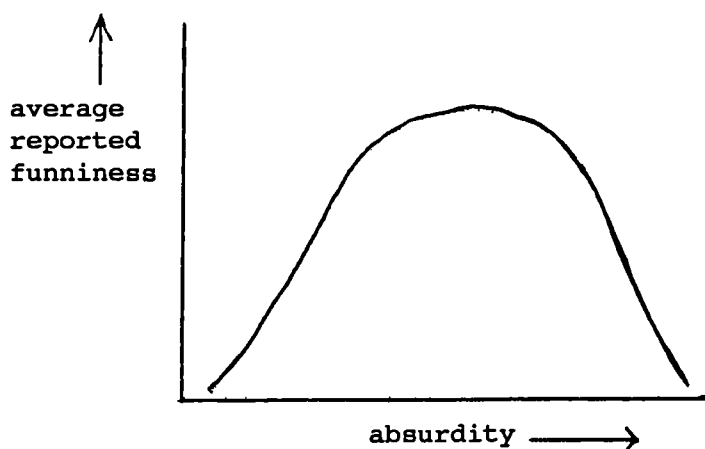


Fig.4 Relation of reported funniness to absurdity, based on Ertel's findings.

This is a potentially fascinating finding, particularly in conjunction with the suggested relation in Fig.3. We must, however, be cautious:

"Overall, the evidence supports the notion that incongruity is a sufficient cause for amusement ... Even if incongruity is not a sufficient cause of amusement it is a strong determinant ... In summary it can be stated that incongruity is a determinant, perhaps a sufficient cause, of amusement. It is not clear though whether incongruity and amusement relate in a linear or curvilinear fashion."<sup>60</sup>

To return to Nerhardt's above comments on "laughter without amusement", we might again remind ourselves that there are many pleasures rooted in the psychoanalytic notions of difference, recognition etc. which have a difficult relation to what we are calling 'amusement' (cf. pp.72-73 above). These pleasures include those of anticipation, and of predicting the punchline of a joke, and a certain amount of work has been done on the effect of timing in jokes on reported amusement.

"A timing pause might evoke an increment of amusement by allowing the audience time to anticipate the subsequent occurrence of humour ... Such anticipatory thought might lessen, or even eliminate, the eventual incongruity of the joke."<sup>61</sup>

The hypothesis would then be that increased timing-pause during the joke-delivery and specifically before the punchline would reduce the (perceived) incongruity of the joke. That Wilson's results are inconclusive (his comments on the validity of his experiment are an exemplary instance of scientific scepticism)<sup>62</sup> is hardly surprising in view of the complexity of the situation, but a restatement of this very complexity is itself illuminating. First there is the problem of expressive factors other than timing-pause (voice, inflection) which may affect amusement. Second, there is the problem of measuring incongruity, and the separating of some 'objec-

tive' notion of incongruity from perceived incongruity. Thirdly and most confusingly, how would the (simplified) above hypothesis be affected by the suggested inverted U-shaped relation of Fig.3 above? If very high incongruity-levels are not usually found amusing, would a lowering of perceived incongruity by the use of a pause shift the response back along the curve and increase the amusement/reported funniness? Fourthly, and partly in answer to this last point, all the above effects would arguably be overlaid by the inhibiting effect of hypercathecting the mechanism by which psychic energy is released from repression (cf. pg.102 above).

The final point is supported by empirical work on sexual and aggressive jokes: Wilson himself found that:

"... appreciation of joke-form facilitated enjoyment of sexual joke themes when timing pause was brief."<sup>63</sup>

and that increasing the timing pause increases awareness of the (tendentious) content with a consequent interference with/rejection of the pleasures of the joke-form. Gollob and Levine sought to see if having to 'explain' a joke would reduce its effectiveness, and though they found that

"In conclusion, although we realize that alternative explanations may account for the data obtained in this investigation, our positive results increase our subjective confidence in the heuristic and predictive usefulness of Freud's hypotheses concerning distraction as an important factor in the enjoyment of aggressive humour."<sup>64</sup>

the "alternative explanations" are extremely pertinent; Gollob and Levine's subjects were first asked to record their amusement at various jokes which were on a 'scale' ranging from highly aggressive to mildly aggressive; ten days later they were asked to explain why each joke was funny and to again record their amusement-level. The observed inhibition, particularly of high-aggression humour, by

having to explain the humour is here clearly complicated by the effects of repetition, which may include the pleasure of recognition and/or the reduction of pleasure due to familiarity.

b) Amusement and anxiety/repression/inhibition/suppression

At the heart of the research in this field we find a tangle of theoretical and methodological complexity and a consequent variety of results and conclusions. Most researchers have used a variety of techniques, which means that each piece of research is attended by its own peculiar methodological problems; generalisations should therefore be very tentative. The research of Strickland, Dworkin and Efran, Singer Gollob and Levine, and also of Spiegel, Rosenwald, and Grizwok and Scodel<sup>65</sup> has been generally supportive of Freudian models, as has, to some extent, that of O'Connell. The evidence of Byrne, Doris and Fierman, Luborsky and Cattell, Young and Frye has tended to cast doubt upon/problematised such models.

One way into this labyrinthine material is through the question of whether anxiety and/or aggressivity are symptomatic of repression or of lack of repression. The problem is that

"It is arguable whether admission of sexual and aggressive impulses is symptomatic of an absence, or a moderate or low level, of repression ... Freudians may argue, from a theoretical rather than an empirical base, that everyone represses their instinctual nature to some degree."

and further that

"the problem of determining whether and to what extent individuals employ repression seems to make experimental testing of Freud's theory extremely difficult."<sup>66</sup>

Some researchers, notably Byrne and Murray, have tended to operate with the assumption that overt/conscious aggressivity indicates a lack of repression, so that when they observed a positive correlation between overt/conscious aggressivity and enjoyment of aggressive humour, they either concluded that

"... humour preferences are independent of motivational states."<sup>67</sup>

or went further to propose a complete inversion of Freudian assumptions; Wilson writes of Epstein and Smith's research:

"Epstein and Smith failed to confirm the Freudian hypothesis, but observed a significant relationship between insight and amusement ... A simple and exciting interpretation of the relationship between insight and humorous appreciation, the converse of the Freudian notion, would be that the enjoyment of humour is inversely related to repression ... There is evidence that insight is inversely related to repression and positively related to humorous appreciation - so it seems reasonable to propose that amusement and repression are inversely related."<sup>68</sup> (original emphasis)

It must be said that the situation is not made easier by the fact that other researchers who have used the same kind of relatively simplistic assumption about overt hostility/lack of repression have obtained different results: Strickland for example carried out substantially the same experiment as Byrne with quite different results.<sup>69</sup>

A good corrective to the simplistic notions exemplified above can begin with O'Connell:

"Theoretically a person could repress an impulse yet show such impulse derivatives as hostile behaviour or appreciation of wit in his overt actions."<sup>70</sup>

His hypotheses are then based on the metahypothesis that

"within this theoretical framework, wit could be considered as a tension-reducing mechanism, with appreciation of wit contingent upon 'some' but not 'too much' tension or stress."<sup>71</sup>



which is echoed by Rosenwald:

"... the operation of repression should increase amusement, but only if the inhibition were readily liftable."<sup>72</sup>

and takes us back to Fig.2 (pg.189 above) and the graphical relation of amusement to repression. Whilst the findings of, say, Epstein and Smith may thus appear to be entirely anti-Freudian, they may not be so much so if the repression levels involved were on the down-slope of the curve; beyond a certain point, a particular joke or comedic element may offer insufficient gratification to make the momentary release from repression economically worthwhile.

Another problem with the notion of repression/hostility/sexuality deployed by many of the researchers is that they have created 'drive-arousal' situations in which the anxiety, aggressivity or sexual arousal are artificially manipulated. We shall look into some of these experiments below, but their relevance is likely to be limited; we shall be more interested in finding ways to measure existing attitudes (anxiety etc.) to specific subject-matter such as the violent or the excremental, and the 'Blacky Tests' used by Frankel and referred to both by O'Connell and by Young and Frye, look exciting. (cf. pp.181-182 above). Her finding that

"... those subjects judged to be maladjusted did not appreciate jokes reflecting the discovered problem area."<sup>73</sup>

previously observed by Herbert Barry (op cit), would be quite consistent with the model being developed here wherein high levels of repression in relation to anality, say, or other aspects of sexuality, would be characterised by decreasing appreciation of humour related to that field.

A number of researchers who have used 'drive arousal' techniques have mobilized concepts of 'inhibition'. Though the term has not generally been very precisely defined in the literature, it can generally be seen as an externally manipulable variable co-extensive with repression proper. It seems to be assumed that putting the subject in an inhibiting situation exacerbates the effects of repression, whilst removal of inhibitions is likely to weaken the forces of repression. The work done by Singer, Gollob and Levine is an illustration of this method and of the difficulties involved. The supposition is made that

"... the presence of mild inhibitions may indeed be a necessary precondition for the fullest enjoyment of aggressive humour. Particularly strong inhibitions, on the other hand, are likely to render the joke-facade ineffective and thereby interfere with appreciation of aggressive humour."<sup>74</sup>

It was then found that 'inhibition' of aggressivity had the effect of reducing enjoyment of hostile cartoons.

"That the inhibition subjects manifested lowered enjoyment of aggressive cartoons but not nonsense cartoons indicated that humour appreciation was a function of the fit between the specific inhibitions (and/or affects) mobilized by the arousal procedure and the cartoon content."<sup>75</sup> (original emphasis)

The obvious difficulties of quantifying inhibition in any such way give rise to another problem. Given that an inverted U-shaped curve has again been hypothesised, unless it is possible to measure the level of inhibition with a degree of accuracy, it is possible to point to a validation of the theory whether inhibition affects amusement or not: the levels of inhibition or total resultant repression could have been on either side of the peak of the curve! Furthermore, and even more seriously, there is an assumption in Singer, Gollob and Levine's work (which tends to be shared by others) that moral norms and injunctions inhibiting sadistic/

cruel/aggressive tendencies can be mobilized by showing the subjects paintings depicting violent themes/events. It is at least questionable whether inhibitions can be manipulated experimentally in so facile a way.

Another factor which is likely to obscure any straightforward relation between repression and amusement at tendentious humour is the suppression based on social taboo, on norms of social behaviour/acceptability.

"... it is not surprising that experimenters have failed to confirm the Freudian hypothesis relating amusement and repression. Humorous appreciation achieved by relief from repression would be confounded by, and compounded with, the amusement consequent on relief from suppression."<sup>76</sup>

Though we may want to argue that social taboos and behaviour norms are themselves linked to the economic nexus in a manner analogous to the determination of different kinds of neuroses and repressions by the familial structures consequent on a specific mode of socioeconomic formation (pp.14-25 & 31-36 above), it is clear that attempts to distinguish the effects of repression and of suppression are destined to be exceedingly difficult. We may indeed be tempted to fall back (not a very satisfactory position) on Freud's own assertion that in the case of jokes enabling a lifting of social or political obstacles,

"... however much these and analogous jokes of a tendentious nature may satisfy us, they are not able to provoke much laughter."

whereas

"... the removal of an internal obstacle may make an incomparably higher contribution to the pleasure."<sup>77</sup>

Strickland's experiment (op.cit) was designed in part to examine the relative contributions of repression- and suppression-related releases to appreciation of different kinds of humour. He tends to betray a rather crude understanding of 'repression' according to which it is a matter of all-or-nothing;

"... if the S were truly repressing hostility and aggression he would very likely respond negatively to aggression in humour or actually "miss the point" of aggressive jokes."<sup>78</sup>

This seems to leave no room for variable measures of amusement as representing various degrees of repression. Despite this, and the consequent overvaluing of suppression, Strickland's suggestion for future research shows greater insight:

"While the present results may be adequately explained more economically in terms of suppression rather than of repression, repressed motivations may account for an individual's consistent trend of humour preferences that operated in so-called 'neutral' situation. Suppression, on the other hand, may account for momentary short-term preferences that can be super-imposed when specifically provoked. Thus a person with a general inclination to favour jokes with a sexual theme might prefer hostile wit if placed in a sufficiently frustrating situation. Periodic testing over long-range intervals might provide some evidence on this point."<sup>79</sup>

### c) Drive Arousal

We have noted one or two of the limitations associated with the 'drive arousal' techniques employed by many researchers; let us now look briefly at the methods used and at some of the complex and contradictory results which have been obtained.

Sexual drive arousal has included reading classical 'erotic' passages, looking at classical 'erotic' paintings and looking at photographs of models. Aggressive/hostile drive-arousal has included reading texts, looking at paintings, and being subjected to

a variety of provocation/insult techniques! Immediately evident is the disparity between the various methods, which is likely to make many comparisons/corroborations problematic if not impossible. Thus for instance Singer at one point used some Goya paintings to sensitize his subjects to representations of violence; Young and Frye employed a programme of priming their subjects with insults. Though this may have been very effective in making the subjects more hostile, the consequences of the hostility may not have been what the experimenters were looking to test:

"The insults may have distracted attention, or induced an antagonism towards the experimenter that generalised to his humour ... Perhaps Young and Frye were outstandingly talented at abuse."<sup>80</sup>

According to Young and Frye their results showed that

"contrary to Freudian prediction there was no increased appreciation of wit under insulting conditions ... The results agree with Byrne (1958) and O'Connell (1960) in showing that experimental attempts to affect appreciation of specific kinds of humour by differential motivation arousal are not successful."<sup>81</sup>

What this instance exemplifies is the confusion over what exactly the consequences for repression are supposed to be when a particular drive is 'aroused'. Does arousal of the drive lead to greater or lesser repression? Do the Cleese/Chapman shouting sketches of the TV Monty Python, Vivian of The Young Ones, and/or the Dangerous Brothers of Saturday Live<sup>82</sup> function to increase aggressivity in the spectator? If so, what is the effect of repressed (in this case perhaps rather suppressed) impulses? Such questions are particularly beguiling in relation to Wilson's inverted U-shaped curve.

That the results of drive-arousal work also depend on the kind or drive being studied is suggested most effectively by Strickland, who administered the same humour test to an induced-hostility group, an

aroused-sexual-motivation group, and to a control group. Strickland's descriptions of the arousal procedures are worth reproducing to give an idea of the kind of work with which we are dealing.

"In the first experimental condition, the experimenter (E) attempted to arouse hostility and anger in the Ss (Hostile group). When the S appeared at the appointed time, the E conveyed through his tone of voice and small gestures his displeasure at being interrupted. The S was then ushered curtly into an adjoining room and told that the E would be with him "in just a minute". The room itself was windowless and completely bare except for straight chair and table. The door was then slammed shut and the S was left alone for nearly 20 minutes. At the end of this period the E re-entered the room and without apology or explanation administered the humour test.

The second condition (Sexual group) attempted to arouse sexual motivation following an approach suggested by Clark. When the S was introduced into the experimental situation he was presented with 10 8x10 photographs of nude photographer's models. He was told that the pictures had been rated by arts students on their artistic qualities and that we were trying to determine the relationship between art and sex; it was then his job to rate the pictures solely on their sexual attractiveness. He was asked to rank the 10 photographs in order of his preference and then in a paragraph to describe what he particularly liked about his first choice. When this task was completed, the S was given the humour test.

In the third condition (Control group) the S was given the humour test immediately after being brought into the experimental situation."<sup>83</sup>

His specific hypothesis was that

"... a person who is annoyed and frustrated but is prevented from expressing his hostility should respond more favourably to humorous material of a hostile nature."<sup>84</sup>

His results indicated that the hostile situation increased the appreciation of hostile humour but interfered with the appreciation of other kinds of humour. He also found that the sexual arousal tended to increase the appreciation of sexual humour without interfering with the appreciation of other forms of humour. These are interesting findings, but we are then immediately back with the problem of whether the arousal in each separate case corresponds to

an increase or a decrease in total repression. From Strickland's descriptions of the experimental procedures, it certainly appears that the hostility-inducing technique would have increased tension and discouraged any release of repressed energy, but it is not at all clear how the sexual motivation would affect inhibition or repression of sex-related repressed energy. To be fair, Strickland himself is quite circumspect about this.

Some others, including Young and Frye, and Byrne, carried out similar experiments, but with different results. Young and Frye come to frankly anti-Freudian conclusions (cf. pg.201 above) and Byrne finds that

"... for the hostile, sex and nonsense cartoons, motivation arousal did not exert a significant influence on cartoon ratings."<sup>85</sup>

though his citing of O'Connell as also offering "uniformly negative results" seems rather cheeky.

Byrne himself offers two pertinent differences between his own study and Strickland's. He seems in his concluding remarks to concede that the (usual) practice of rating each cartoon/joke/comedic element independently is preferable to his own method, by which

"... a given category could not be rated more amusing without causing a corresponding decrease in the rating of another category."<sup>86</sup>

which must have imposed some odd constraints on the kinds of results possible! The other difference briefly discussed by Byrne can be observed among many other pieces of research: while Strickland's administration of cartoons was individual, Byrne's was carried out on a group basis. In view of the fact that it is scarcely going to

be possible, in our own research, to carry out work on an entirely individual basis, the effects of the group on response to the comedic are going to be very relevant. Evidence as to the nature and predictability of group influence has been sparse; the influence no doubt also depends on the type of humour, and also on the way the influence is being detected. We have already noted (pg.174 above) Young and Frye's contention that private self-report is unaffected by a group context whereas the laughter response is facilitated by such a context.

We have also already noted O'Connell's refusal of the common postulation that there exists

"... an inverse relationship between repression and overt behaviour but a direct relationship between repression and appreciation of wit. Thus, the person who 'represses' hostility should not act in an overtly hostile manner, but should enjoy hostile wit."<sup>87</sup>

His attempts to measure adjustment/stress were more subtle than is usual, the large groups notwithstanding (he used 332 subjects in all), and his stress-inducing technique also appears sound:

"For the two stress classes, a faculty member accompanied the E on the second day and became the instigator of both failure-stress and insult techniques. He introduced himself as a professor of clinical psychology who was shocked and appalled at the attitude of the class in taking the SAI the previous class period. The results of the test, he said, pointed out that the members were either lying about themselves or were grossly maladjusted. He also stated that since the tests reflected a marked lack of adjustment, the majority of the class should give serious consideration either to leaving college or to changing their majors. After reiterating the threats and insults a few times, the instigator informed the students that they would be given one more test, and that they should display some maturity in taking it, rather than performing like high school freshmen. They were also admonished against communicating with their neighbours in any way. The E distributed the WHAT immediately upon the conclusion of the instigator's remarks."<sup>88</sup>

The danger of students taking out their frustration on the WHAT



exercise is incidentally reduced by the use of a person other than the experimenter to deliver the insults!

O'Connell's first hypothesis, that exposure to stress would increase the appreciation of wit, was not confirmed, but he is less sure about the significance of this finding than Byrne, or Young and Frye for example. Results confirmed that men tend to prefer hostile wit, women tend to appreciate nonsense wit more. O'Connell also found that 'maladjusted'<sup>89</sup> persons enjoyed hostile wit more, except under stressful condition, when they appreciated it less than 'well-adjusted' subjects. He confirmed that 'well-adjusted' subjects more frequently preferred 'humour' to 'wit':

"In contrast to his attitude toward wit, Freud always extolled the humorist as disdaining the use of excessive repressions, and he depicted humour as the most adaptive nonpathological defence."<sup>90</sup>

In a small way, the most interesting finding is the lack of conclusive evidence for O'Connell's fifth and last hypothesis, that 'well-adjusted' subjects should appreciate nonsense wit more than 'maladjusted' ones: he found that gender-differences here were far more significant than S-I scores. Had his final hypothesis as well as his third been confirmed, it would have 'shown' that women are better-adjusted than men.<sup>91</sup> In fact O'Connell himself calls into question the validity of the S-I scores as indicators of 'adjustment':

"According to the Y-phenomenon (Rogers 1954) a small discrepancy between self and ideal scores could signify either a fairly successful adjustment or a highly defensive maladjustment."<sup>92</sup>

and calls for further research. His own discussion section is illuminating:

"These results are congruent with psychoanalytic theory, according to which the maladjusted person represses hostility, but can make use of the verbal distortions of Hostile Wit for partial release so long as the objective situation is not too stressful. ... Certain researchers were ready to discount Freudian theory because of a positive relation noted between appreciation of wit and hostile behaviours (Byrne, 1956 Luborsky and Cattell 1947). In these studies, the key variables of adjustment and stress were not measured, and it was erroneously implied that psychoanalytic theory considers that the neurotic is not hostile (e.g. inverse relationship between repression and overt behaviour). In this study it was found that maladjusted people, as defined by their self-ideal discrepancy scores, enjoy hostile wit under non-stressful conditions."<sup>93</sup>

The subsequent study of Earl Dworkin and Jay Efran (op.cit, cf. pg.177 above) is critical of the design of most previous experiments (including those of O'Connell), citing the work of Singer as the most thorough. In particular, they point out that previous studies had not used any independent index of arousal, and that it could therefore not be ascertained whether a particular effect was in fact due to arousal since there was no evidence that arousal had been effective! Dworkin and Efran's use of a modified form of the Nowlis-Green MACL certainly seems to constitute an adequate measure of anxiety and hostility arousal.

Their Hypotheses<sup>94</sup> are concerned with the differential appreciations of different kinds of (oral, taped) humorous monologues by angered and non-angered groups of subjects, and with the effect of hostile/non-hostile humour on reported anger/hostility.

#### d) Reduction of hostility

Dworkin and Efran's use of drive-arousal techniques prompts us to note again the distinction to be made between such induced

hostility, 'pathological' hostility, and hostility due to an everyday/accidental exposure to objectionable (comedic) situations. It is the last of these which is of most relevance to us, yet little work appears to have been done here.

The definition of the role of the comedic in 'pathological' hostility is, of course, a dubious enterprise at the best of times; we can note, with O'Connell, that

"Wit has been regarded as a means of indirect expression for latent hostile urges. Freud was never certain whether this mechanism was essentially pathological or adaptive. Early in his thinking he correlated the appreciation of hostile wit with psychoneurotic symptoms (1905), but in later years (1921) he included it among normal adaptive mechanisms."<sup>95</sup>

When Byrne<sup>96</sup> found that those subjects who expressed hostility found hostile cartoons funnier than those subjects who did not express their hostility, he was working with hospital patients whose 'types' he felt able to categorise. That he was unable to replicate this finding in his own later work was probably due less to any fundamental difference between those inside psychiatric hospitals and those outside than to the distinctions between induced and 'found' hostility.

Still, as we have begun to see, the results with regard to induced hostility are far from uniform. Dworkin and Efran found that anger arousal led to a greater preference for hostile humour and that exposure to (any) humour seemed to decrease reported feelings of anger and anxiety. Interestingly, though, they could not establish a link between appreciation of humour and its anger-reducing property. Singer, Gollob and Levine sought to increase aggression-inhibition in their subjects, then observed that the

increased inhibition lowered appreciation of aggressive humour (cf. pg.198 above).

Singer independently found that aggression arousal did not significantly affect humour appreciation. However, he also replicated Dworkin and Efran's non-correlation of tension-reduction and appreciation, finding that hostile humour was particularly aggression-reducing for highly aroused subjects but that

"... posthumour aggression and tension levels were unrelated to humour appreciation."<sup>97</sup>

As Wilson puts it,

"Although the humour dampened tension and aggression, this pacification did not seem to be mediated by the enjoyment of the humour ... Perhaps a juggler, or a performing seal, might have been equally effective."<sup>98</sup>

returning us abruptly to the base-line of pleasure.

e) Amusement and Sexual content

"There is a pervasive view that humour is anarchic and subversive ... Jokes are fiercely conservative, and undoubtedly (sic) gain in their effectiveness by concealing their true political colours by masquerading as subversives."<sup>99</sup>

This is particularly true of sexual humour, though recent developments of parodic/pastiche and alienating forms of humour, which exhibit a reappropriation of Brechtian methods in the service of a kind of sexism-aversion-therapy, must call into question Wilson's term "true political colours". Apparently-oppositional comedy may be conservative in the sense that it enables the working-off of energy which could otherwise be available for action, for real political work. There is arguably a long history of "laughing it off", of comedy as safety-valve, or 'coping mechanisms' ("you've

got to laugh haven't you") identified by Wilson in the following terms:

"When a bewildering event occurs posing weighty mental problems, by evading simply rational explanation, the audience may resolve incongruity by treating it as funny, as reflecting artificial or perverse determinism."<sup>100</sup>

Still, pleasure can surely also be liberatory, can be used to combat the forces of oppression. Though it would appear that pleasure has been substantially colonized by conservatism and inertia, it should also constitute a category around which radicality can mobilize.<sup>101</sup> Social humour is one thing.

The work done by jokes on an unconscious/individual level is another matter; here the conservatism is much more insidious, residing as it does in the metastructure itself as well as in the exposure to (most likely) dominant-ideological representations in the jokes' overt subject-matter. The dispersal of small amounts of psychic energy via the joke-work enables repressions to remain at 'comfortable' levels instead of building to levels where destructive ('anti-social'?) consequences may result.

Most experiments on sexual-content of jokes therefore have the air of scratching the surface of a lake. In one of his own experiments, Wilson sought to present puns "with or without sexual content". Whilst this does recognize that there is a kind of ground-mechanism for puns,<sup>102</sup> the notion of adding a 'sex-ingredient' to a neutral pun appears suspect:

"A constant set of puns were presented with or without sexual content and at various levels of timing and initial incongruity."<sup>103</sup>

Wilson found that sexual content increased appreciation, and that

appreciation was also dependent on incongruity. Increased timing boosted awareness of sexual content and reduced appreciation of the low-incongruity jokes. There was a significant negative correlation between perceived sexual content and reported funniness (cf. pp.193-194 above). These results are, on the whole, consistent with Freudian expectations, but Wilson himself places his findings in context:

"I would not expect amusement to be highly correlated with awareness of sexual content if amusement depended on additional factors which varied independently of this awareness - as indeed it does ... I would also expect the individual's level of sexual inhibition, sexual drive, arousal ... to influence amusement."<sup>104</sup>

He also notes that

"Subjects may have had similar perceptions of the sexual content of jokes but differed in respect of other factors that mediated amusement."<sup>105</sup>

One such factor has been studied by Doris and Fierman. They found that the gender of the experimenter/interviewer compared with the subject was potentially critical to the subject's response. High-anxiety subjects consistently appreciated all kinds of cartoons less in the company of an experimenter of the opposite gender than did low-anxiety subjects. In the company of a same-gender experimenter there seemed to be little difference between the responses of high-anxiety and low-anxiety subjects for any cartoon category. Doris and Fierman were at this point using both E-observed Mirth-responses (6-point scale) and self-reported appreciation scores, and found that the high-anxiety subjects' devaluation of the cartoons when faced with opposite-gender experimenters was reflected much less in the E-observed scores than in the self-reported preferences. This can be seen as another piece of evidence in favour of self-

report as being more 'authentic', but it also raises relevant question about the positions occupied by 'male' and 'female' subjects in relation to Freud's paradigmatic joke-structure, indeed to language, the look and all forms of representation. Differential positionings in symbolisation will have to be borne in mind in interpreting any audience research done for this thesis. In a nutshell, "The social context appears to be crucial."<sup>106</sup>

A limited amount of research appears to have been done on female and male responses to sexual humour, and Wilson observes that most research comparing the two had found that men showed greater appreciation than women of this kind of humour.<sup>107</sup> He carried out experiments of his own and found out that the (ipsative) scores for appreciation of both innocent and sexual humour were not significantly different for men and for women. He makes an interesting and telling point about the nature of the humour presented to the subjects:

"The studies showing less amusement of sexual humour among women employed chauvinist, professional wit - produced mainly be men for masculine amusement. In this experiment, the humour was probably more egalitarian and appealing to feminine taste in attributing sexual appetite and initiative to women as well as to men."<sup>108</sup>

Let us not, however, ignore Doris and Fierman's above social-context maxim. We shall see later how Wilson's findings in this experiment are fatally flawed!

A major omission in most of the work done on responses to sexual humour has been any attention to the type of 'sexual' content. Wilson's own reference to Gershon Legman as one of his sources<sup>109</sup> of sexual jokes is rather absurd in view of Legman's own systematic

study of different kinds of sexual jokes and the way they are related to different kinds of repressed anxieties about childbirth, anality, castration etc. Though his work makes no claims to empirical status, his erudite insights and psychoanalytically knowledgeable speculation are nevertheless of value.

For Wilson the 'form' of the sexual humour is more important, and he outlines his model in a chapter entitled 'The Functions of Filth'. He develops a heuristic typology consisting of four categories; if the 'joker' is J and the 'audience' is A and the object of the humour is marked by \* then the four mechanisms are as follows:<sup>110</sup>

voyeurism	J → A*
innuendo	J* → A*
exhibitionism	J* → A
general ribaldry	J → * → A

Though Wilson does note that sexual advance/innuendo ("smut") is more acceptable if framed in a jocular mode (a clear parallel to Freud's paradigm for the joke-structure), his model only partly intersects with Freud's; despite the letter J, the categories clearly encompass forms of humour other than jokes. In contrast to the generally more 'private' nature of voyeuristic and innuendo humour,

"General ribaldry and exhibitionism appear in the academic literature as the forte of professional humourists."<sup>111</sup>

Commenting on the history of 'fool's licence', Saturnalia, ritualistic misrule etc.,<sup>112</sup> Wilson also observes that

"Professional sexual humour in industrial societies consists largely in general ribaldry, whereas in pre-industrial societies it is generally exhibitionism."<sup>113</sup>



The 'general ribaldry' category does have a catch-all feel to it, and the examples given could easily be seen to 'contain' elements of the other three types, yet even as a composite term it has at least some descriptive strength.

There is a further reference to 'industrialized societies' in Wilson's concluding section, which is entitled 'The Cryptic Conservative':

"In industrialized societies the professional comic is a social success, so deviancy on his part would offer a subversive example. Strong legal restrictions of obscenity law, then, have a defensively conservative effect in ensuring that the comic does not offer a deviant model of success."<sup>114</sup>

Wilson at one point outlines Lenny Bruce's arrest and prosecution for public use of a 'private' work ("fuck"); he observes that in finding him guilty of obscenity the court correctly identified Bruce's subversiveness in relation to the sexual reticence usually effected by the suppressive work of guilt and shame. Bruce performed in Britain in 1962 and was subsequently refused entry as an 'undesirable alien', but his continuing status and reputation in a veritable 'alternative culture' to some extent expose an apparently naive use of 'success' and 'ensure' in Wilson's formulation. Those who turn their backs on success as conventionally defined are likely to view the brushes with the law as a positive recommendation.

Monty Python courted court action with much of their earlier published and record material, but usually took legal advice to avoid actually getting into trouble. Specific sketches from some of their TV episodes also came close to getting them into trouble;<sup>115</sup> the Undertakers sketch of 22nd December 1970 and 'Salad Days' of

30th November 1972 are good examples.<sup>116</sup> Monty Python's Life of Brian and The Meaning of Life have had their share of legal difficulties and moralistic opprobrium. Nevertheless the Monty Python team appear to have emerged with an alarming air of respectability - this is perhaps not surprising. Also not surprising is the reference to Spike Milligan 'hosting' Saturday Live on 29th March 1986 as being 'The Establishment'. What needs to be looked at (and this is another way of saying what this work is largely about) is whether, and if so how, the kind of excremental, aggressive and absurd humour produced by the Monty Python team, sometimes in the teeth of various forces of censorship and disapproval, can suggest "a deviant model of success".

It is time to return from this digression to our review of empirical work on the subject.

f) Amusement, derision and aggressivity

Most of the literature on derisive humour has been concerned with direct derision of one person by another, and with the functions which this fulfils for each party. Various forms of 'superiority theory' from Aristotle and Plato to Hobbes, Bain and Bergson have been taken up and incorporated into models elaborated by Freud, Kris, Ludovici, Zigler, Grotjahn and many others. The possible functions of such humour for the receiver or butt have been discussed by Klapp, Makarius, Welsford and Goffman among others. Radcliffe-Brown<sup>117</sup> has described how in many cultures (and arguably in a number of situations in our own type of culture) mock-insults and derisive humour form part of 'joking relationships' within which

potential tension and aggressivity can be worked off in a socially acceptable way. Related to this is what Wilson calls 'wit's licence', which gives rise to

"affectionate abuse ... extreme insults too extreme or inaccurate to be ... sincere abuse."<sup>118</sup>

Another kind of relation which the butt can have to derisive humour involves a degree of misrecognition of its purpose. Wilson refers to La Fave's findings:

"The butt may feign amusement while nurturing grievance, or may be genuinely amused while failing to see that he is the target of the joke ... The butt may be amused by the incongruous, rather than self-disparaging aspects of the joke."<sup>119</sup>

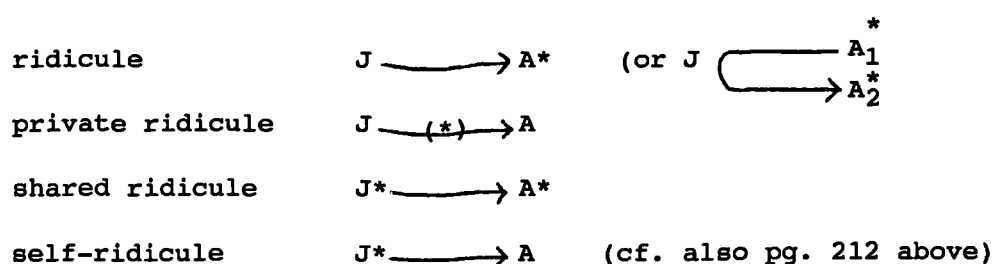
References to the social/political functions of derisive humour are harder to find in the literature. Here, though, is one colourful example:

"Joking is essentially conservative, and ridicule shows an unattractive face of conservatism, funnelling malice and abuse downwards through the social pyramid. People ridicule deviants, subordinates, those with mental or physical abnormalities, members of minority- and out-groups. And within the privacy of their racial minorities, the middle-class deride and scapegoat the lower strata. Those with the least status, at the base of the pyramid, seemed oppressed by a cumulative burden of abuse. From the worm's eye view, humour must seem a particularly malicious and inequitable form of expression and not an amusing matter. True, the worm does snigger at those above the ground in the daylight of social prestige and power. Yet as universal scapegoat and oil-rag for the social machine he receives far more abuse than he can ever return."<sup>120</sup>

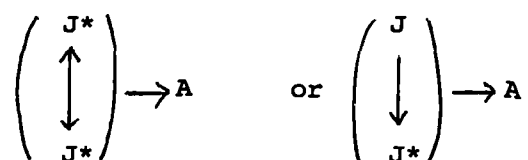
Seductive at first, this passage, on second reading, does not ring true, and indeed appears to be a somewhat patronizing assessment of minority and/or working-class consciousness. The "oil-rags" may derive a great deal of pleasure from deriding those in power, and who is to say that the pleasure is entirely of a conservative

nature? (cf. discussion of 'Conflict function' pp.91-92 above) The confusion between humour and abuse which runs through the passage is also significant because there is a lot of pleasure to be gained from the use of abuse, with or without humour!

Wilson devotes a substantial chapter to the functions of derivative humour in various contexts,<sup>121</sup> first dividing the genre into four 'mechanisms':



Though he makes some interesting observations along the way, his use of his own typology is not very clear. I have included it only to point out what is missing from it, namely the spectacle of two third parties in an abuse situation; this could be shown diagrammatically thus:



Empirical work has been done by Gutman and Priest<sup>122</sup> on appreciation of jokes featuring aggression by one character towards another. They constructed 'squelch' jokes and tried to manipulate the perceived 'goodness' and 'badness' of the protagonists by making their behaviour/characteristics in the run-up to the joke either 'socially acceptable' or 'socially unacceptable'. Leaving aside the question of whether these latter terms would have meant the same thing to all the subjects (though pre-tests were in fact carried

out), Gutman and Priest than had four jokes exemplifying the permutations good/bad aggressor, good/bad victim.<sup>123</sup> Their hypotheses were that a 'good' person's hostile act would be seen as less hostile and more humorous, and that a 'deserving' victim of hostility would elicit a greater appreciation of the humour than an 'undeserving' victim. Their subjects were asked to assess humorousness, the hostility of the punchline, the social acceptability of the aggressor and of the victim, and the justifiability of the aggression.

Both hypotheses were seen to be confirmed. More precisely, their results indicated that

"... the perceived character of the victim is the major determinant of the justifiability of aggression; aggression towards a socially unacceptable victim is significantly more justified than aggression towards a socially acceptable victim ... Subjects saw humorous aggression as positively justified only when the victim deserved his fate and his squelcher was a good person."<sup>124</sup> (original emphasis)

and they go on to make the assertion that

"... the present research shows that identification with a victim of aggression is less related to humour than is identification with the source of aggression."<sup>125</sup>

Their findings with respect to appreciation of humour were perhaps less conclusive. Wilson notes that they

"... observed that amusement decreased with perceived intensity of humorous aggression."<sup>126</sup>

and that

"Seemingly the audience were prepared to enjoy aggressive jokes regardless of the moral or social acceptability of the humour."<sup>127</sup>

Wilson also comments that the appreciation of the humour of aggression was found by Mannell<sup>128</sup> to depend on whether the 'punishment' of the victim is 'realistic', or set in a more 'fantastic' setting

where moral questions are not encouraged. With Monty Python we are clearly dealing with a non-realist setting in which any desire for 'justifiability' for aggressivity is likely to be suspended. We shall return to one or two aspects of Gutman and Priest's work in the 'Problems' subsection below.

Though more work clearly needs to be done in this field, the relation which the receiver of the joke enjoys with aggressor and victim respectively is particularly important. It is presumably possible for the reading/viewing subject to identify either with the aggressor or with the victim (or indeed with both to different degrees). Gutman and Priest claim (surely surprisingly) that other research

"... has shown that it is difficult for people to identify with the victim of aggression, even when innocent."<sup>129</sup>

and express surprise at the extent of qualified sympathy for the victim indicated by their subjects through the 'justifiability of aggression' scores.

The preferential identification with aggressor or victim may of course be due to some individual/psychological propensity: siding with the underdog has its own self-virtuous gratifications! It also surely has much to do with the perceived characteristics of the protagonists, and indeed Gutman and Priest tried to give half their victims 'social acceptability'. The question that this label begs, of course, is precisely how the unacceptability is constructed: differential identifications with protagonists, aggressor or victim, must be based on much more subtle comparisons with ideal images etc. One alternative to - or rather variation on - the usual Freudian

notion of identification is described by Wilson: it is Wolff's appropriation of William James' concept of the 'larger self', which would consist of

"... all possessions in the widest sense of the term -including the body, mind, spouse, children, bank account, reputation, domestic pets, friends, relatives, interests ..."130

as well as ethnic group, gender, class ... All such categories would than be 'affiliated objects'. In a way this is quite consistent with the Freudian operations in identification of sublimation and transference, and alerts us to the many ways in which subjects might identify with aggressor or victim, socially acceptable or not. Wilson at one point refers to Zillman and Cantor's 'explicit statement of previously unstated assumptions':

"Affinity or antagonism towards the butt ... may be quantified, ... the evaluation of the butt may vary with time and context ... the evaluation may be determined by empathetic factors that can be independent of membership of reference groups."131

Wilson himself seems to favour the tendency to identify with the victim/aggressed; in his tabulation,<sup>132</sup> A is a member of the audience and A\* is the victim of aggression:

	Reaction to content criticizing A*	Reaction to joke 'form'	Net reaction to joke
If A likes A*	Displeasure	Pleasure	Slight displeasure, indifference, or slight pleasure
If A is indifferent to A*	Indifference	Pleasure	Moderate pleasure
If A dislikes A*	Pleasure	Pleasure	Extreme pleasure

Fig.5 Audience's reactions to the form and content of derisive jokes.

Though clearly an oversimplification, this model does help account for all those times when the object of a joke (political figure or group, ethnic group, any other person or situation which has affective resonance) is an 'affiliated object' and the joke is consequently not very funny.

We have used a little space to look at possible subject relations to perceived derisive/abusive humour between third parties because a prominent feature running through the Monty Python TV series (perhaps less so in the subsequent films) was the series of sketches written mostly by John Cleese and Graham Chapman about often exceedingly aggressive/abusive characters. Here the abuse is clearly a spectacle, and pleasures derived from empathy with the screen personages are clearly compounded by pleasures of recognition, of performance, of language, of excess. We are not necessarily any longer in the realm of jokes, or even of humour. Gutman and Priest's question is

"Under what circumstances, if ever, do people enjoy unjustified aggression disguised as humour?"<sup>133</sup>

#### 4.3 Problems

A number of methodological problems have been thrown up by the research reviewed, and some have been mentioned, in passing, above. This is a good point at which to bring them all together.

The difficulties seem to fall into three groups, the first of which I do not propose to discuss: this is the problem of making sense of the statistical operations and jargon used by a number of



the researchers. Obviously a degree of statistical rigour is essential and this may be another matter to consider in designing an empirical audience-response study. The other problems tend either to relate to specific experiments or variables, or are of a more general meta-methodological nature. There is bound to be some overlap here!

a) Problems more specific to particular experiments or variables.

We have already noted that terms such as 'humour', 'joke' etc. have generally been rather vaguely employed by most writers studied. Singer, Gollob and Levine, Byrne, Strickland, and Doris and Fierman all used cartoons in the study of 'humour', Dworkin and Efran's work on 'humour' clearly employed various kinds of 'jokes', as did that of Gollob and Levine. Gutman and Priest were more consistent in their explicit use of 'jokes'. Of those writers consulted, only O'Connell seeks to draw a working distinction between 'wit' and 'humour'. Nevertheless, though he observes that

"Occasionally, humour has been mentioned by psychoanalytically oriented investigators but its connotations have been confused with those of wit, which has been somewhat more frequently studied ..."<sup>134</sup>

his own distinction appears somewhat idiosyncratic. All the comedic instances studied were jokes, and these were then subdivided into three categories: humour, hostile wit and nonsense wit. Although some care was taken over these definitions, and

"to avoid idiosyncratic definitions of these concepts, each judge was provided with a resume of Freud's ideas concerning wit and humour."<sup>135</sup>

the use of humour as a subcategory of the joke seems simply wrong.

As has been seen before (cf. pp.62-65 & footnotes), Freud's own use of the term 'humour' was ambiguous, but a kind of joke it never was! A possible (but only partial) explanation of O'Connell's usage would be a different translation of the German 'Witz' from that generally favoured; while the most suitable English translation of Freud's use of 'Witz' is usually taken to be 'joke', O'Connell may be translating it as 'wit' and then placing 'humour' as a parallel category. But then what does he mean by 'joke'? ...

A further problem raised by O'Connell's method of categorising his jokes but common to much of the other research, is the use of 'judges', who are frequently experts in the field. Why should a group of clinical psychologists be most suitable for the task of pre-selecting the material to be used? What assumptions about 'objectivity' and the status of scientific discourse are being made here?

A major problem raised by a number of the studies is that of selection of subjects and the representativeness of the results. Byrne and Strickland both used university psychology students as subjects, and most other research has used either undergraduate university or college students. There are, of course, good economic and institutional reasons for this, but most of the researchers tend to treat the consequent limits on replicability of their results with more or less cavalier disregard. It is generally thought sufficient to assume the student subject groups to be 'homogeneous'; very little attention is paid to the psycho-social background of the students, beyond (sometimes) noting age, gender, native language.

One of the few comments recognizing the strictly limited validity of the results comes from O'Connell:

"To what degree one can generalize beyond the youth of the middle class to different ages and classes is a problem for future research."<sup>136</sup>

Most studies have also been content to include equal numbers of male and female subjects and to leave it at that, though Doris and Fierman (cf. pg.211 above) did note some gender-specific findings and Gollob and Levine's work was with a group of female subjects. O'Connell's work, with its gender-specific hypotheses, again stands out in this respect (cf. also pp.204-207 above);

"Hostile wit appears to be a predominantly male reaction, and in everyday situations it is the more maladjusted male who is disposed to use it ... Perhaps if our culture frowns upon hostile wit for women, only certain types of women rely upon this mechanism for tension reduction."<sup>137</sup>

Wilson's experiment on differential male/female appreciations of sexual humour (cf.pg.211 above) nicely demonstrates the way the subjects' specific orientations can sabotage a worthy enterprise. Wilson is here commendably dismissive of his own findings:

"In addition, the experiment used subjects who were grossly unrepresentative of mankind and womankind. When the experiment was conducted in 1973, students at the L.S.E. tended to espouse a fierce egalitarianism, reject traditional sex roles and pretend an ignorance of gender to avoid making offensive distinctions between men and women. It would be a mistake to generalize from the results of this experiment about the resemblance of the sexes."<sup>138</sup>

This reference enables us to note again the general lack of attention in the literature to type of sexual content in jokes or humour: Strickland and Young and Frye are particularly clear examples. The rationale is provided by Wilson, who in his own experiments used dirty jokes in sexual and 'clean' versions(!):

"The sexual versions of the jokes were selected from Legman's 'Rationale of the Dirty Joke' to satisfy two criteria. The jokes were chosen for their reliance on verbal ambiguity, and for the structural independence of their form and content. This independence meant that the joke ambiguity might be expressed with or without sexual content, since neither of the double-meanings were sexual. The content variable was manipulated by leaving the dirty jokes intact, or denuding them of their sexual content. The sexual versions of the jokes expressed themes of exhibitionism, permissiveness, sexual exploitation by men and by women, impotence and rape."<sup>139</sup>

The argument is then that

"Factor-analytic studies suggest that the presence of sexual content in humour contributes to only one or two factors in amusement ... Apparently, there are no multiple sources of amusement that correspond to and reflect the immense variation and scope of sexual jokes. Consequently, no attempt was made in this experiment to control, or systematically vary, the nature of sexual themes. The sexual versions of the experimental jokes were regarded as being interchangeably representative of the community of dirty jokes."<sup>140</sup>

Perhaps the factor-analytic studies missed something.

The accounts given by researchers rarely give many examples of jokes/humour used, but the question of sexism and patriarchal definitions about what is funny about sex signifies through its almost ubiquitous absence. Some insight into the sexual-political assumptions underlying the sexual (and other) humorous material can be gained from a few of the descriptions of sexual drive-arousal: Byrne used 'sexual' passages from books such as Ulysses, Aphrodite, God's Little Acre; Singer used Goya paintings; Strickland's use of photographs of nude models was a naked demonstration of heteroerotic cultural assumptions about sexuality. Apart from the assumption of heterosexual orientation, the study is marked by the absence of any reference to the gender of the subjects excepts for the persistence of the word 'his'.

b) Problems of a more general methodological kind

Many of the papers studied begin with a preamble which briefly sets out the theoretical framework which informs the work and states some assumptions and hence hypotheses which are to be tested. The danger which I suspect most of the studies do not really engage with is that in an attempt to gain evidence for a hypothesis, to validate an assumption, an experiment is designed (unconsciously) in such a way as to encourage confirmation of the hypothesis: you find what you are looking for. It may be that in sciences such as physics and chemistry experiments can be constructed which to all practical intents and purposes at least dispense with this objection. In experiments whose very object of study is individual and/or social human behaviour it must be extremely difficult to guard against this kind of 'experimental effect'.

A closely related problem in sociological research is how to control the experimental environment (but then if it is 'controlled', what is its relation to 'reality'?) so as to reduce the number of variables, and then how to control and observe those variables. How sure can we be in any particular experiment that other factors are not responsible for (changes in) humour appreciation or anxiety scores which are unaccounted for? In fairness, most researchers point out this problem, but the design of the majority of the experiments does not seem over-rigorous. Thus Gutman and Priest's jokes seek to vary the combinations of good/bad aggressor and good/bad victim, but there are surely so many other differences between the jokes, so many uncontrolled variables, as to make the correlation of enjoyment with goodness/badness or aggressor/victim

quite unsound. For example the joke involving 'bad aggressor' and 'bad victim' constructs both protagonists as 'bad' by having them behave loudly in a busy restaurant. One of them asks "What do I have to do to get a glass of water around here?" and the other replies "Why don't you try setting yourself on fire?"<sup>141</sup> Among other things this can be read as a ritual insult between friends. But is it an instance of 'aggressive humour'? Is it a 'squelch joke'?

This leads directly to another difficult matter, that is the culture-specificity of what can be defined as "hostile", "sexy" etc. The conventions which determine what kinds of representations of hostility and violence, say, are acceptable in literature, radio and TV and in films (and in empirical audience studies!) are culturally and historically variable. We have already noted the culturally relative relevance (pp.216-219 above) of Gutman and Priest's notion of 'social acceptability'. Other examples are Gollob and Levine's (acknowledged - op.cit) use of a high proportion of husband-wife cartoons in their 'aggression' categories<sup>142</sup> and Dworkin and Efran's use of recorded comedy acts such as Woody Allen, Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby as instances of 'hostile humour'. I am not familiar with the hostile end of these performers' material, but many of today's audiences would probably find it rather tame. There is thus considerable need for care in constantly reconstructing the categories of aggressivity and sexuality in humour, and also in assessing the forms of humour which can fruitfully be studied with particular audiences. In our study of Monty Python's Meaning of Life, it may be worth considering including a more 'extreme' example, say, of

excremental humour<sup>143</sup> as a 'limit case' in order to provoke some more marginal responses.

Another context-specific factor is the clarity/comprehensibility of jokes/comedic elements used. In principle a certain cultural capital is always required in order to decode any communicative artefact, but it is clear that in studies such as those we have been looking at the assumption is made that the 'understanding' of the joke, cartoon or humour corresponds<sup>144</sup> to the predicted reading; the possibility of 'deviant' readings is assumed to be negligible; the use of 'judges' in pre-selection is a partial safeguard against dud jokes. One study which admits to having encountered difficulties in this respect is that of Doris and Fierman: two of their 'sexual content' cartoons were misunderstood by 85% of the subjects. Though the results for these cartoons were not used, one has to wonder about the other cartoons! The authors themselves aver that some cartoons such as the two discarded may

"require certain knowledge not ... at the S's disposal."<sup>145</sup> This remains a factor which is unmentioned in the vast bulk of the literature.

Another difficulty in this kind of research is the 'evaluation apprehension effect'. It is mentioned in passing in a number of the studies, and refers in this context to feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness or shame associated with the examination of tendentious jokes/humour. Subjects can be unwilling to admit finding something funny if attention has been focussed on the sexual or violent nature of the comedic element, on the 'dubious' kind of pleasure involved!

Gollob and Levine note this possibility and speculate about the likely effect on the results:

"... it would be expected that humour ratings of cartoons depicting highly aggressive, socially undesirable behaviour would decrease more than the ratings of cartoons depicting activities with a higher degree of social acceptability."<sup>146</sup>

which is a problem because this is the direction in which the appreciations were expected to move anyway according to a Freudian repression-model. Gollob and Levine did take the precaution of using only anonymous reporting-methods (cf. pg.175 above), as suggested also by Wilson:

"It also seems important to limit the possibility of evaluation-apprehension artefacts, to ensure that rated amusement reflects private appreciation. This may be achieved, as in the former experiments, by measuring anonymous and private ratings."<sup>147</sup>

This is probably as effective a measure as anything. Nowlis (1966) notes in his work on Mood Adjective Checklists that

"... it appears ... that the social desirability status of a word has very little, if any, effect on how it is checked when the subject is asked to report ..."<sup>148</sup>

Nevertheless the evaluation appreciation effect is likely to remain a thorn in the side of any research dealing with potentially 'socially undesirable' pleasures.

A final problem common to all experiments of this kind, indeed to any kind of psychological experiment, is that of the experimental subject's attitude to the experiment. Each subject comes to such an experiment with particular demands, expectations, and an idea about what the whole business may be about, and this is true also of more flexible experimental situations such as questionnaires and interviews. As Martin Orne points out,

"... the student volunteer is not merely a passive responder



in an experimental situation but rather he has a very real stake in the successful outcome of the experiment."<sup>149</sup>

Moreover

"... the totality of cues which convey an experimental hypothesis to the subject become significant determinants of subjects' behaviour."<sup>150</sup>

Orne's term for this factor affecting the subject's experimental behaviour is the "demand characteristic of the experimental situation" and he goes on to make the heuristic assumption that

"... S's behaviour in any experimental situation will be determined by two sets of variables: a) those that are traditionally defined as experimental variables, and b) the perceived demand characteristics of the experimental situation."<sup>151</sup>

The situation can then become extremely complex. The subject may correctly guess the purpose of the research, and the usual consequence is a desire to comply, to co-operate in proving the experimenter's hypothesis correct!<sup>152</sup> A conscientious experimenter will try to detect such behaviour and exclude those results but a conscientious subject may surely conceal her/his suspicions about the experiment. The results can be

"... a pact of ignorance resulting from the intertwining motives of both experimenter and subject, neither wishing to create a situation where the particular subject's performance needs to be excluded from the study."<sup>153</sup>

Though demand characteristics are mentioned by Gollob and Levine and by Young and Frye, none of the research studied appears to consider them as a factor in designing a particular experiment. Gollob and Levine interviewed their subjects at the end of their study and found that

"Although subjects felt that the study was concerned in some way with aggression and humour, no subject seemed even obliquely aware of the possibility that we were interested in seeing whether the decrease in funniness from pre- to post-test was different for different types of cartoon content."<sup>154</sup>

The implied conclusion that demand characteristics therefore did not affect their results seems rather hasty. Still, Orne's own suggestion is that post-experimental interviews might be the nearest thing to a solution, though he also points out that interviews themselves are subject to demand characteristics.

This obstacle can to some extent be combated by having the interview conducted by a second experimenter who is not familiar with the experimental behaviour or the results.

"When there is less time for awareness to impair and restrict our pleasure, we may be misled by the form of the joke, and feel that the passage is primarily funny, rather than tendentious, believing that we are revelling in the humour not the sin. Delivered with the right timing and surprise, the joke may offer the furtive joy of ignoring taboos."<sup>155</sup>

The project of this thesis is to look at why (and when and how) this 'furtive joy' is available to some people and not to others, particularly in relation to Monty Python. As we have seen, this is likely to depend on a number of factors, including the specific form of each comedic element, the timing and surprise-value, the viewing context, and the psychoanalytic predisposition of the viewing subject. We also need to bear in mind the possible strategies for coping with humour which threatens to unearth anxieties which are too deeply repressed to be released through comic or joke mechanisms; we have mentioned the possible adoption of an investigative mode (pg.171 above), and another strategy is to find something amusing through 'misrecognizing' the humour. Writing of satire (Till Death Us Do Part comes to mind), Wilson notes that

"Obviously it is simpler and more economical for the bigot to misunderstand a joke than to entertain doubts that may reshape his life."<sup>156</sup>

Though in the case of excremental, grotesque or absurd humour there may in some instances be less else to find funny instead, the same may also apply.

To conclude, a modest reminder of one pitfall to be avoided:

"It seems likely that attempts to explain wit and humour preferences by one factor alone give an incomplete picture of the dynamics of wit and humour."<sup>157</sup>

5.

The development of a methodology for a study of a 'Meaning of Life' audience.

1. This section will constitute a report on work-in-progress and, though I have attempted to structure it in a coherent way, there will necessarily remain loose ends which have not been followed up. In particular this section will include a brief outline of 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications' models of audience response; (this will be brief: subsection 4), but I do not intend at this point to dignify this section with subheadings. Though there will be an overall trajectory from a slightly more theoretical/global consideration of audience studies through a central section on Janice Radway's version of reader-response analysis and culminating in some remarks on the methodological/statistical questions thrown up by her approach, examples from her work will tend to punctuate the whole of this section.

2. Janice Radway's work on a group of American women who habitually read romance novels<sup>1</sup> was suggested as potentially useful in view of the problems I was encountering developing a methodology for relating audience response to the comedic (specifically, excremental/grotesque humour) to degrees of repression. It was felt that my project of effectively trying to quantify repression (psychoanalyse the audience?!) and to measure 'degree of amusement' etc. was likely to run into methodological as well as theoretical difficulties, and that the questionnaire/interview methods and theoretical model used by Radway may bear more fruit.

Radway used a sample of forty-two regular romance readers for her questionnaire data, and conducted eight hours of taped discussion sessions with sixteen of the most regular readers. It is important to note that in addition to this an important amount of data was provided by one Dot Evans, herself an avid romance reader but also, significantly, supplier of a consumer-guide service on romance novels to a large number of local women. Radway's respondents were provided by Dot Evans. It is thus worth noting already that the sample of readers was selected not according to predetermined demographic criteria but on the basis of their heavy use of the commodity; Radway does, however, also look at the demographic significance of such a choice.

Radway's literary object of study was a large number of romance novels: the number is indeterminate since many were referred to either repeatedly or occasionally in the interviews/discussions, and many are used by Radway herself either illustratively or as objects of particular lines of enquiry. She discusses at some length the problems and consequences of such a diffuse object of study.

As we shall have reason to remark later, her study is exemplary in its refusal of conclusive findings under the guise of some (spurious?) scientificity.<sup>2</sup> The danger then, of course, is of a relapse into impressionistic pseudo-analysis. Whether or not Radway is guilty of such practice may emerge in what follows. In any case, her approach certainly seems to take part in a

"... conviction that sooner or later mass-media research must cease using raw demographic variables for its independent variables, and simply amount of consumption for its dependent variable."<sup>3</sup>

3. A first consideration in any applicability of Radway's methods to film studies would have to include the (not necessarily problematic) transfer from one medium to another. The specificity of literary and cinematic institutions and of reading/viewing contexts would have to be taken on board, as would the different signifying practices of writing and film. Most problematic would be the nature of the reading process itself and of the psychic relation of 'reader' and object-text. Though there are clearly points of similarity between how books, TV and film are 'read',

"... the explanations employed by Dot and her women to interpret their romance reading for themselves are thus representative in a general way of a form of behaviour common in an industrial society where work is clearly distinguished from and more highly valued than leisure ..."4

the differences are surely very significant. Interestingly, the single reference in Radway's book to a comparison of the media contains a confusion which is left unmentioned; for Dot Evans,

"reading ... draws the individual into the book because it requires her participation ... she is quite sure that TV viewing and film-watching are different."5

If it is true that television does not implicate the viewer because it demands her/his participation less than does a book, what is missing here is any mention of the power of the mimetic image, of scopophilic drives which encourage, perhaps even demand, an unconscious investment in the act of watching.

Though this question cannot be pursued here, it is crucial to the differences which beset debates about effects, uses and gratifications, interpretation, encoding and decoding in the areas of TV/film and literature respectively. The following potted summary of the debate as I see it in the area of TV/film will be supplemented by a commentary on relevant points emerging from Radway's

work; though this is no doubt theoretically/methodologically highly suspect (I am not qualified to say much about the effects etc. debate in literature studies anyway), I hope it may be useful!

4. Audience-response in film/TV has tended to be regarded either as 'message-based', entailing some notion of what effects this message has on the viewer/audience, or as 'user-based', entailing a more or less conscious appropriation of the media artefact for the gratification of some need.

Very schematically, the 'effects' approach was the first to gain popular currency, to be gradually supplanted in the 1960's by the 'uses and gratifications' approach. We shall see below how this overt schematisation neither takes into account the more complex placement of much theoretical work along the way, nor provides adequate notions on which to ground a more comprehensive model of communications theory.<sup>6</sup>

"Research following the first strategy (message-effects) has been, until recently, predominantly behaviourist in general orientation: how the behaviour of audiences reflects the influences on them of the messages they receive."<sup>7</sup>

James Halloran, in writing of early media research, said that "manipulation, exploitation and vulnerability were the key words".<sup>8</sup> "The myth of omnipotence" dies hard, and though the extreme manipulation thesis has gone, assumptions about the power of the media tend to linger on. Halloran identifies the development of social science studies to take account of the 'cultural baggage' (always) brought to a media product by a reader/viewer, and identifies the danger of denying any effectivity to the medium:

"In general the trend has been away from the idea of exploitation, away from an emphasis on the viewer as tabula rasa, as someone wide open just waiting to soak up all that is beamed at him. Now we think more in terms of interaction or exchange between medium and audience, and it is recognized that the viewer approaches every viewing situation with a complicated piece of filtering equipment. This filter is made up not only of his past and present, but includes his views and hopes for the future. We should welcome this change in emphasis but there is always a possibility that in making the shift the baby might be thrown out with the bath water. Instead of having the false picture of the all-powerful influence of television presented to us we now run the risk of getting an equally false picture of no influence whatsoever."<sup>9</sup>

This constitutes a good summary of the extreme positions of what we are calling 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications', but in practice there are certainly relatively few adherents to the limit-positions themselves. I want now to try to map onto that trend (insofar as it is/has been operative) a particular theoretical development which may have lagged behind that trend in time, but which nonetheless has an important relation to it. In concentrating on one of the ways in which the film-text/viewer relation<sup>10</sup> has been theorised, we shall effectively be starting at the 'effects' end of our putative 'spectrum'.

The notion of the (film) text as a 'semiotic machine' with its own effectivity can be seen as a more sophisticated theorisation of the 'effects' thesis, escaping the 'manipulation' tag but tending to incur the equally derogatory accusation of determinism. In this model the viewing subject engages with a text in which a certain range of responses is possible. This is effected in two kinds of ways. First, the viewer/reader is positioned in relations of speculation, by a relation to the symbolic, which are primarily 'effects' of the cinematic apparatus and of the viewing process,<sup>11</sup> or at least of the dominant modes thereof. Second, the (illusory) position of a



unitary self-constituting subject is engendered by a number of specific textual strategies, most famously Colin McCabe's 'classic realist text'.<sup>12</sup> The argument is that every text is made of discourses, and that typically these discourses are hierarchised so that the narrative discourse, which naturalises existing socio-economic relations and makes available for the subject a position of knowledge about the other textual discourses, is privileged. As a result, such texts can be seen to take on a 'productivity',

"... a productivity which has been frequently defined in terms of the capacity of 'the' text to set viewers in place, in a position of unproblematic identification/knowledge."<sup>13</sup>

so that the limit-case 'effect' is arrived at:

"viewing is not a moment of productivity, it is rather textually determined - a mere textual effect."<sup>14</sup>

Caricature apart, the question is whether McCabe (and others) ever proposed this mechanism as totally overdetermining, or whether it can be seen as a tendency resistible in the framework of an oppositional reading practice. Though McCabe admits that his original conception of the classic realist text was overly formalist, "contaminated by formalism", by a "structuralism it claimed to have left behind", and that

"The position outlined in my article made the subject the effect of the structure (the subject is simply the sum of positions allocated to it)."<sup>15</sup>

his subsequent move to an emphasis on text and viewer as forming a single system in which the text cannot be held to have any separate existence implies (but perhaps only implies) that the relation (hence the reading) must be determined both by the textual operations and by the subject's prior social positioning.

That this analysis needs to be "in a determinate social moment"<sup>16</sup> is also a clear indication that the subject's position, insofar that it varies historically, will partly determine the relations held with the text; elsewhere McCabe underlines this specificity,

"That the breaking of the imaginary relation between text and viewer is the first pre-requisite of political questions in art has, I would hold, been evident since Brecht. That the breaking of the imaginary relationship can constitute a political goal in itself is the ultra-leftist fantasy of the surrealists and of much of the avant-garde work now being undertaken in the cinema."<sup>17</sup>

stressing that the undermining of the imaginary relation between text and viewer is a valid project only with specific texts or groups of texts and with specific viewers/audiences.

Nevertheless it would appear that what McCabe has chiefly advocated<sup>18</sup> is not a rereading of classic realist texts from the point of view of some oppositional or 'symptom-reading' strategy (hence he seems after all to endorse the inevitability of spectator position?) but rather a change in the texts offered for consumption, calling for the use of Brechtian practices which problematise the viewer's position with regard to the text and offer no single position to the spectator.<sup>19</sup> There appears, then, to be an exclusive concern with the means of representation.

With Sylvia Harvey's reiteration of this problem, in terms of

"... an ill-considered and unhelpful assumption that all attempts at sociological research into the conditions of reception or consumption of filmic texts can only be manifestations of the rashest empiricism. The baby (the study of the conditions of consumption) has too often been thrown out with the bathwater (the inadequacy of many of the methods employed)."<sup>20</sup>

we can initiate a swing back towards our 'real' reader/viewer with needs waiting to be gratified.

Certainly the ignoring of the 'real' socialised reader/viewer and the assumption of a subject as entirely a "textual effect" would be irredeemably formalist. Though some writers<sup>21</sup> have asserted that McCabe was guilty of such formalism, my reading is that he did leave space, at least in principle, for the 'real' viewer/viewing situation.

The arrival of our real viewer on the semiological scene is succinctly signalled by Hardy, Johnston and Willemen, who observe that the 'real' social subject

"... always exceeds the subject implied by the text because he/she is also placed by a heterogeneity of other cultural systems and is never coextensive with the subject placed by a single fragment (i.e. one film) of the overall cultural text."<sup>22</sup>

Morley summarises the relation of viewing subject and text:

"It follows that the meaning produced by the encounter of text and subject cannot be read off straight from its 'textual characteristics' or its discursive strategies. We also need to take into account what Neale describes as 'the use to which a particular text is put, its function within a particular conjuncture, in particular, institutional spaces, and in relation to particular audiences.' A text should, also, not be considered in isolation from the historical conditions of its production and consumption - its insertion into a context of discourses in struggle, in discursive formations cohering into different strands of ideology and establishing new condensations between them (cf. Laclau); also its position in the field of articulation secured between the discursive and economic/political practices. Both the text and the subject are constituted in the space of the interdiscursive; and both are traversed and intersected by contradictory discourses - contradictions which arise not only from the subject positions which these different discourses propose, but also from the conjuncture and institutional sites in which they are articulated and transformed.

The meaning(s) of a text will also be constructed differently depending on the discourses (knowledges, preju-

dices, resistances) brought to bear on the text by the reader. One crucial factor delimiting this will be the repertoire of discourses at the disposal of different audiences."<sup>23</sup>

This cannot be bettered in its defining of the relation between the characteristics/discursive strategies of the text and the discourses available to the reader in particular conjunctures. We can observe at this point that this kind of conceptualisation bears more than a passing resemblance to the definition of reader-response theory that we shall encounter soon, and note also that the factors determining the 'discursive fields' of readers/viewers will be both inclusive of book-reading and film-viewing and differentially specific to those activities. Thus the whole area of cultural competence/capital would encompass a number of specific cultural activities, but factors such as the immediate context of book or film consumption (home, group, cinema/library etc.) would affect the available discursive options open to the reader/viewer in different ways according to whether it is a film or a book. We leave aside here the crucial role of specifically psychoanalytic determinants in any study of these discursive mappings.<sup>24</sup>

To return to film/TV studies more specifically, the work done by Stuart Hall and David Morley<sup>25</sup> in particular has led to the development of models of encoding and decoding of discourses in/from (in this case televisual) media, with a stress on the relations of congruence/non-congruence between the dominant 'positions' offered in the TV programme/film and the 'positions' occupied by various viewers.

This 'theoretical' trajectory (I repeat, overshematised and necessarily highly selective), in a process arguably echoing that detectable in the 'empirical' literature, brings us to the other end of our spectrum and the postulation of uses and gratifications, which supposes some active selection process on the part of the viewer/reader. Some discursive elements may be appropriated 'straight' (naturalistic detail, messages congruent with the subject's world-view), some may be accepted in a negotiated way, and others may be rejected or ignored<sup>26</sup> (political/ideological filtering devices keep out objectionable discourses, including discourses which contradict 'experience'):

"For these workers the films do not have an 'operative character'; they do not draw from them any material which they could use to cope more actively with their problems. On the contrary: they avoid concerning themselves with the interpretations offered by the films."<sup>27</sup>

The question then is of how this 'selection' is to be theorised. I would argue that some psychoanalytic or psychological model is necessary in order to avoid the crudest voluntarism, and also that some notion of 'needs' is indispensable as pretext for 'uses'. Thus (Radway's own) observations that "they know exactly how the chosen book will affect their state of mind"<sup>28</sup> and "they know perfectly well why they like to read"<sup>29</sup> would need to be interrogated as to precisely what needs were being satisfied and in what way. It may be true, but it is not sufficient, to say with Richard Hoggart that

"within this kind of aesthetic art is conceived as 'marginal', as 'fun', as something 'for you to use'."<sup>30</sup>

To be fair, Radway does pursue the question of needs in some detail (see below). To look ahead, however, it is difficult to think of the needs being catered for, by the comedic in general or by the

grotesque/excremental of The Meaning of Life in particular, in other than psychoanalytic terms. Radway herself implicitly recognizes the double-bind of conscious motivation underpinned by unconscious factors in the following passage:

"Dot and the Smithton women know well both how and why they read romances ... Yet at the same time they also act on social assumptions and corollaries not consciously available to them precisely because those very givens constitute the very foundations of their social selves, the very possibility of their social action."<sup>31</sup>

As we shall see, however, this latter observation does not inhibit Radway from placing a great deal of credence upon the Smithton women's conscious opinions and evaluations.

We have now traced the 'spectrum' from the extreme 'effects' position in which

"every literary text ... is composed of fixed textual features and devices that have certain undeniable functions and effects on the reader."<sup>32</sup>

to an overtly voluntaristic perspective in which individual readers/viewers consciously use each media artefact for specific purposes.<sup>33</sup> The area which may be most productive in this context for pointing the way forward in my own research is that of encoding/decoding mentioned above, yet we shall have to bear in mind that

"Structuralist semiotics, because it identifies the spectator with the decoder, entrusts other scientific approaches (like sociology and psychology) with the analysis of spectatorship."<sup>34</sup>

which in a way is where Radway's study came in. The move away from strictly semiological models is also reflected thus:

"Whereas the mastering of the code ... was long considered sufficient for receiving images and sounds, the consensus now is that one must dispose of a comprehensive knowledge ... to appreciate the choices made, to follow the consequences, to grasp emerging idiosyncrasies ..."<sup>35</sup>

With this and other above formulations we are equipped to approach the audience model used by Radway in her study.

5. After the above material on the necessarily active role of the social subject in interpreting or decoding the text, the approach explicitly embraced by Radway reads as no surprise. She refers to

"... the fundamental premise of reader-response criticism that literary meaning is not something to be found in a text. It is ... an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with a text's verbal structure. The production process is itself governed by reading strategies and interpretive conventions that the reader has learned to apply as a member of a particular interpretive community."<sup>36</sup> (original emphasis)

Reader-response criticism is an area which I have not been able to follow up,<sup>37</sup> but the resonances with some film/TV research are clear. David Morley's work on Nationwide, for example, attempted to address this question of groupings which tend to share cultural competences (once again Pierre Bourdieu's model of cultural capital seems very relevant). Referring to some work on the popularity of kung-fu films among male urban working-class youth, Morley echoes the argument that

"... the genre is popular to the extent that it 'fits' with the forms of cultural competence available to this group."<sup>38</sup>

Even closer to Radway's concerns, Morley also notes that an English Studies Group at the Birmingham CCCS studied 'feminine romance',<sup>39</sup> with a view to

"... (attempting) to establish the forms of inter-discursive connections which can account for the purchase of particular textual forms on particular categories of readers, under determinate socio-historical conditions."<sup>40</sup>

Another reformulation of this approach occurs in Suleiman and Crossman:

"One rather elementary question is 'Who reads what?' In more formal terms, how does membership in a given social group at

a given time influence, or even determine, one's reading habits and taste?"<sup>41</sup>

Thus what is central to this kind of study is that both the extra-textual and the intra-textual (explicitly referred to in Suleiman and Crossman's title) are operative; a text produces a range of possible or preferred subject positions which are entered by readers/viewers in different ways according to their membership of particular interpretive communities, cultural capital available etc.

The aim is then

"... to avoid, on the one hand, a semiological enquiry into processes of signification considered in the abstract, outside of their sociohistorical conditions of existence, and on the other hand, to avoid a reductionist sociological approach which would neglect the specificity of practices of signification."<sup>42</sup>

6. A central and important part of Radway's initial strategy was to turn her back (at least temporarily) on any notion of the objective researcher as guarantor of some unitary explanatory truth about the text.

"I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their views of romance reading."<sup>43</sup>

She decided to abandon

"... the particular theoretical assumptions that would have justified the presentation of my own reading as a legitimate rendering of the meaning of the genre for those who usually read it."<sup>44</sup>

and asserts instead that

"... any semiotic account of a culture, termed by anthropologists an ethnographic account, is the product of an interrogation of one cultural system by another, carried out through the interaction of ethnographer and informant."<sup>45</sup>

We can note in passing that Jean Rouch (many of whose films are of an ethnographic/anthropological nature) is also very aware of this 'experimental effect',



"Most people refuse to recognize that any anthropology must destroy what it investigates. Even if you are making a long-distance observation of breast-feeding you disturb the mother and her infant, even if you don't think so. The fundamental problem in all social sciences is that the facts are always distorted by the presence of the person who asks the questions. You distort the answer simply by asking the question."<sup>46</sup>

and that

"his call for a participatory cinema is clearly based on assumptions that ethnographic enquiry can never be objective ..."<sup>47</sup>

The degree to which Radway was (apparently) prepared to bracket off her own 'analysis' whilst carrying out her field-work is illustrated by the remark:

"... when analysis proceeds from within the belief system actually brought to bear upon a text by its readers, the analytical interpretation of the meaning of a character's behaviour is more likely to coincide with that meaning as it is constructed by the readers themselves."<sup>48</sup>

In order for 'new knowledge' to be produced about her object of study, of course, some input on Radway's part was bound to be necessary; yet the willingness to enter the readers' own problematic seems exemplary. Later Radway does reassert the multiplicity of perspectives she employs, and writes of "looking at the romance-reading behaviour of real women through several lenses."<sup>49</sup> At the same time she is insistent (in her conclusion) that there is no 'objective' position from which the text can be 'read':

"... it will be impossible ... to use this conclusion to bring a single, large picture into focus simply because there is no context-free, unmarked position from which to view the activity of romance-reading in its entirety."<sup>50</sup>

Put yet another way,

"... the text, at the very instant that it reaches the very essence of its ties with the interlocutor (revealing its need for a subject as horizon of reference and opportunity for profit), also demonstrates that this reality can be found neither 'outside' of its domain, nor 'inside' at its

very core, - but has to achieve an integral relation between inside and outside, as the sole possible basis."<sup>51</sup>

Radway thus elected to use the readers' own perceptions as the starting-point:

"... to understand what the romance means, it is first essential to characterise the different groups that find it meaningful, and then to determine what each group identifies as its 'romance' before attempting any assessment of the significance of the form ... We must begin to recognize this fact of selection within the mass-production process."<sup>52</sup>

and indeed the bulk of her book is concerned with an analysis of what romances/reading mean to the readers. What may be instructive is that this last formulation would appear to have a more general applicability. What kinds of groups identify Monty Python as 'their' comedy? In what ways do they see it as meaningful? What kinds of needs do they see the Undertaker Sketch or exploding Mr. Creosote as fulfilling for them? The fact of selection, be it of romance novels or of Monty Python, indeed needs to be recognized, and the persistent notion of a homogenous/universalized mass culture resisted.

Even in her development of a Propp-inspired typology of romance fiction narrative functions, Radway notes that it is

"... essential to observe that even this more standard form of literary interpretation begins here in reader perceptions."<sup>53</sup> (my emphasis)

and the same applies to her analysis of character types. It is worth stressing here that though (since Radway's detailed findings about romance are not especially relevant to us) there is little discussion in these pages of the content of the interviews and of the models of narrative, character, the ideal novel etc. thrown up by Radway's discussions with the women, this material takes up most

of her book. Only towards the last quarter or so of the book (and particularly in the Conclusion) does she bring notions of language, textual analysis, ideology, and to some extent psychoanalysis to bear on what she has found out from her respondents.

7. Radway deals very lucidly with the way in which language can function in (realist) literature. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned conviction that

"... meaning is not something to be found in a text. It is ... an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text's verbal structure..."<sup>54</sup>

she redefines part of her project as being

"... to trace the interaction between textual properties and reading strategies."<sup>55</sup>

After briefly outlining some of the ways in which the figures of conventional narrativistic language tend to constitute texts 'reflecting' the 'realist' ideology of the 19th century novel,<sup>56</sup>

Radway tellingly describes the transparency of the 'passive' reading process:

"Although it is true that readers never discover meanings 'in' or behind the words they find on the page but actively attribute significations to the verbal structures from their own linguistic repertoire, it is nonetheless clear that Dot and her women read the romantic text as if such simple discovery of meaning was possible. In fact, the above-mentioned linguistic techniques all maintain the illusion that language is a transparent window opening out onto an already existent world because the readers themselves treat these linguistic features in a particular way..."<sup>57</sup> (original emphasis)

"Dot seems to judge writing solely on the basis of the efficiency with which it gets its job done, that is, tells the story."<sup>58</sup>

There is a parallel here with the unconsciousness of the 'reading' process in relation to the comedic, and in particular to jokes.

Within any broadly Freudian paradigm the efficacy of a joke depends

upon its mechanisms remaining hidden. Certainly jokes are generally judged according to how effective they are in doing their job, in provoking laughter. It is also a commonplace that the 'ideological work' carried out at an unconscious level by films (arguably less so by TV programmes) is made possible by many levels of 'realism' from the mimetic to the narrative. Maintaining our focus on the way in which 'real' viewers may 'use' this 'realism' (and this is not to discount the ideological work carried out by film), we can note George Custen's observation<sup>59</sup> that films most (or at least very) often act as just so much 'reality-data' to be incorporated into everyday talk about any number of diverse subjects, and not as data for speculation about 'meaning'. This again indicates the way in which filmic discourse is frequently perceived as 'transparent', in much the same way as is the language of romance fiction in Radway's sample.<sup>60</sup>

The respondents' own view of the reading process is a challenge to the reader-response theoretical model:

"... these women also believe that the author herself provided the meaning of the story for her readers by expressing it in words. They believe that meaning is in the words only waiting to be found. Reading is not a self-conscious, productive process in which they collaborate with the author, but an act of discovery..."<sup>61</sup> (original emphasis)

Thus instead of "... readers ... seen to be engaged in productive work" albeit "under determinate conditions ... not of their own choosing"<sup>62</sup> we have readers "accepting without question the accuracy of all statements".<sup>63</sup> What Radway is in fact arguing is that the romance fictions read by her respondents are the kind of writing which Roland Barthes calls 'readerly texts'. In invoking Barthes' definitions we can again note how easily this would seem to be

transferable to the 'classic realist texts' of film and television. For Barthes, the 'writerly text' is one which requires the reader's active participation:

"Pourquoi le scriptible est-il notre valeur? Parce que l'enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c'est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte. Notre littérature est marquée par le divorce impitoyable que l'institution littéraire maintient entre le fabricant et l'usager du texte, son propriétaire et son client, son auteur et son lecteur. Ce lecteur est alors plongé dans une sorte d'oisiveté, d'intransitivité, et, pour tout dire, de sérieux: Au lieu de jouer lui-même, d'accéder pleinement à l'enchantement du signifiant, à la volupté de l'écriture, il ne lui reste plus en partage que la pauvre liberté de recevoir ou de rejeter le texte: la lecture n'est plus qu'un referendum. En face du texte scriptible s'établit donc sa contre-valeur, sa valeur négative, réactive: ce qui peut être lu, mais non écrit: le lisible. Nous appelons classique tout texte lisible."<sup>64</sup> (original emphasis)

"... all the linguistic practices discussed thus far mask the reader's active collaboration in the production of textual meaning."<sup>65</sup>

8. The key concept (believe it or not) is the unconscious, which enables us to touch on Radway's attention (either explicit or implicit) to the psychoanalytic determinants in the reading process.

The first way in which she uses psychoanalytic categories is as a part of her analysis of the functions fulfilled by the typical 'ideal heroine' as an identification-figure for the (female) romance-readers.<sup>66</sup> Though Radway writes that

"... the initial function dictating the heroine's loss of connections and identity is more deeply resonant in a psychoanalytic sense than it is overtly topical."<sup>67</sup>

this use of the psychoanalytic is particular to her object of study and need not concern us here.

Secondly we have the repeated references already noted in relation to a voluntarist notion of 'uses' (pp.240-242 above), which clearly beg the question of the unconsciousness of the reading process:

"... they know exactly how the chosen book will affect their state of mind..."<sup>68</sup>

"... they know perfectly well why they like to read..."<sup>69</sup>

"... Dot and the Smithton women know well both how and why they read romances..."<sup>70</sup>

Radway does explicitly recognize the unconscious aspect of the reading activity,

"Yet at the same time they also act on social assumptions and corollaries not consciously available to them precisely because those very givens constitute the very foundations of their social selves, the very possibility of their social action."<sup>71</sup>

but it is striking how she tends systematically to 'trust' and (I would say) overvalue her respondents' 'consciousness' of what they are doing when reading.

Thirdly, and more interestingly in the context of my concern with the comedic, Radway observes, in her comments on the practice of rereading favourite romances, that sameness and difference can both be a source of pleasure. This reminds us of the pleasures of repetition and of discovery (pp.74-78 ff. above), and perhaps constitutes a parallel with the pleasure of new/different comedic elements set in the familiar psychic mechanisms of the joke and the comic. When

"... (Dot) sees no contradiction in desiring an unpredictable plot and wanting to know how it ends before she reads it through."<sup>72</sup>

this is a good example of the pleasure of novelty within a secure

context, the kind of pleasure provided by many generic TV programmes and films, from formulaic sitcom to a new Monty Python film.

The unconscious provides a stepping-stone to the central category of the ideological, which again Radway deals with both implicitly and, increasingly in the final two chapters, explicitly.

There is early comment<sup>73</sup> on the conflict between the apparently very conventional 'message' of the romance novel and the womens' claims that they 'use' the novels actively for self-enhancement. Comparison with film/TV comedy is here oddly lopsided since the supposed virtue of much comedy is its 'shock' value (briefly discussed under 'conflict function' pp.90-92 etc. above). Nevertheless I would suggest that there may be a congruence between the way in which ideologically conservative/reactionary texts (of which the romance novels are arguably examples) may be actively used to fulfil putatively oppositional needs, as Radway appears to suggest, and the way in which comedic material which by virtue of its very form is destined to fulfil a 'control function' may be reappropriated in more active ways. Still, we must bear in mind Radway's formulation that

"... no matter what the women intend their reading to say about their roles as wives and mothers, the ideological force of the reading experience could, finally, be a conservative one."<sup>74</sup>

The question, we must remember, is how Radway handles such a proposal in relation to her empirical work.

She identifies on a number of other occasions<sup>75</sup> the conservative ideological function of 'learning to live with' male aggressivity,

brutality, and even rape. There appears to be an acceptance by her women respondents of their role as servicers of patriarchy, so that for example

"she must close that book reassured that men and marriage really do mean good things for women."<sup>76</sup>

To take up again the notion of 'active use' in response to needs not being met by the womens' environment, Radway comments that

"... it will be necessary to consider the question of whether romance fiction is actually deflecting or recontaining an indigenous impulse to express dissatisfaction with the traditional status quo in the family by persuading women to feel more content with their role."<sup>77</sup>

"By resting satisfied with this form of vicarious pleasure, the romance reader may do nothing to transform her actual situation which itself gave rise to the need to seek out such pleasures in the first place."<sup>78</sup>

Bearing in mind the problem (Radway's and, to some extent, mine) of demonstrating this kind of hypothesis, it is nevertheless interesting to note the similarity between this last formulation and that relating to the conservative function of comedy advanced by Eric Midwinter and cited in Section 2 above:

"By grinning at man's condition, by softening the edges of his aggressive efforts to have wrongs righted, by channeling his energies into the mill-race of laughter, by keeping his pecker up, comedians may have helped resist the correction of legitimate grievances ... it could be argued that they help preserve the status quo, the unrocked boat and the stability of the social fabric."<sup>79</sup>

Another kind of ideological work done by many texts involves articulating and reinforcing notions of 'how the world is' by means of the commonplace, of common sense, through the imaginary relation (cf. pp.101 & 131-133 above). Images (ideologies) about what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses are thus passed off as 'natural', as unchanging, and among these ISAs we find the family.



Consequently Radway is right to

"... wonder how much of the romance's conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood is inadvertently 'learned' during the reading process and generalized as normal, natural female development in the real world."<sup>80</sup>

Since we have also already noted the way in which the classic text (pg.247 above) facilitates the articulation of such ideological strands under the guise of 'realism', it is noteworthy that many romance readers aspire to writing and indeed several of the most successful/well-known romance novelists wrote their first books out of a reader's love for the genre. As Radway notes,

"because romance authors share the same assumptions about language and meaning, they write texts designed to be read in this straightforward manner."<sup>81</sup>

The complicity thus seems complete and it becomes more and more difficult to accept that the romance reading can function in some liberating proto-feminist way, as the respondents sometimes hint. Indeed it is interesting that despite the injunctions which Radway had placed upon herself to suspend 'her' readings, there is a surprising and, throughout the book, rapidly accumulating amount of material explicitly identifying the ideological function likely to be fulfilled by romance reading. As we know, it is the subjection of such explanatory models to (empirical) test that is the problem,<sup>82</sup> but still it is reassuring to see a professional writer's methodological resolve slip in this way!

10. What kinds of conclusions, then, is Radway able to arrive at? She is at pains in her concluding section to stress again the absence of any privileged site of knowledge from which definitive conclusions can be drawn, and within the limits of her circumspection the following is as good a 'conclusion' as any:

"Although in restoring a woman's depleted sense of self romance reading may constitute tacit recognition that the current arrangement of the sexes is not ideal for her emotional well-being, it does nothing to alter a woman's social situation, itself very likely characterised by those dissatisfying patterns. In fact, the activity may very well obviate the need or desire to demand satisfaction in the real world because it can be so satisfactorily met in fantasy."<sup>83</sup>

The latter part of this formulation indeed fits well with Rosengren and Windahl's idea of functional alternatives.<sup>84</sup> Radway also goes on to suggest that

"... the study's investigation of reading as act suggests that real people can use the romance to address their unmet needs experienced precisely because that ideal relationship is made highly improbable by the institutional structure and engendering practices of contemporary society. Furthermore, the focus on reading as a process of construction reveals that the early stages of a reader's interpretation and response to the romantic form can be characterised by the expression of repressed emotions deriving from dissatisfaction with the status quo and a utopian longing for a better life."<sup>85</sup>

In that the need for satisfying relationships, according to this argument, cannot be fulfilled because of the nature of contemporary society (an 'environmental' constraint), the compensatory activity of romance reading can again be easily situated in the Rosengren-Windahl model. Finally, in restating the tentative conclusion that

"Given the apparent power of the romance's conservative counter-messages, then, it is tempting to suggest that romantic fiction must be an active agent in the maintenance of the ideological status quo because it ultimately reconciles women to patriarchal society and reintegrates them with its institutions."<sup>86</sup>

Radway returns us to the vexed problem of provability with

"I feel compelled to point out, however, that neither this study nor any other to date provides enough evidence to corroborate this argument fully."<sup>87</sup>

One has to wonder, given the centrality of the unconscious (hence of the psychoanalytic) in theories of patriarchy and ideology, what could adequately constitute 'evidence' ... Gellner's somewhat

discouraging warning will have to stand in for any more sustained argument at this point,

"It is not so much that empiricism is in some way specially vulnerable to the kind of criticism to which Chomsky subjected Skinner; it is rather, that very few thinkers have rendered other theories of knowledge similarly vulnerable, by making a reasonably sustained effort to use them as the base of a genuinely operationalised explanatory model. Were this done, it is most unlikely that those other theories of knowledge would fare any better."<sup>88</sup> (original emphasis)

though an approach based on a film/TV version of reader-response theory seems as good a way to try as any. Radway's own pointer to the future is that

"We simply do not know what practical effects the repetitive reading of romances has on the way women behave..."<sup>89</sup>

and she identifies a necessary strategy of 'in-depth interviewing' about marriage, sexual relationships etc. This is encouraging since my own original idea was to interview respondents with a view to establishing something about attitudes to anality, repression-levels and so on. But, given Radway's own caution (never mind Gellner's), would this 'prove' anything?

11. The original impetus of this piece of work on Janice Radway's study was to make some comments on her methodology and her use of statistics, with a view to the possible relevance of her strategies to my own work. Many such comments have already now been made in passing, but this is a place to bring them together.

We have already noted Radway's eschewing of the habitual researcher's position of unitary knowledge in favour of a spirit of provisional knowledge based on mutual interrogation of both respondent and observer functions. At times, however, she shows signs of slipping back into an essentialist pose with phrases such as

"... specify as clearly as possible what (the novels) in fact mean"<sup>90</sup>

"... to understand what the romance means, it is first essential..."<sup>91</sup>

or else toppling over into an endorsement of her respondents' mode on thinking which can only be self-fulfilling:

"... when analysis proceeds from within the belief system actually brought to bear upon a text by its readers, the analytical interpretation of the meaning of a character's behaviour is more likely to coincide with that meaning as it is constructed and understood by the readers themselves."<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps these are carping criticisms which only a saint or an insufferable pedant would succeed in avoiding. Be that as it may, discussion became central to Radway's research method. Though clearly this carries with it its own difficulties as regards analysis of the discussion content, there are equally clearly many advantages, not least the degree of spontaneity/lucidity it may be possible to elicit from respondents. One interesting consequence in Radway's work was the emergence, through discussion, of the distinction between 'escape' and 'relaxation'. In the initial pilot questionnaire, fourteen women volunteered (undirected) that they liked romance fiction because it allowed them to 'escape', while only one mentioned 'relaxation'.<sup>93</sup> A few of the (more articulate) women then operated as agenda-setters, so that

"Although most of the other women settled for the word 'escape' on the first questionnaire, they also liked their sister readers' term better. Once these were introduced in the group interviews, the other women agreed that romance reading functions best as relaxation and as a time for self-indulgence."<sup>94</sup>

Radway's modified questionnaire then incorporated this feedback, and a question can then be posed about the relative validity of findings before and after such 'consciousness-raising' discussion.

Another problem, which Radway readily acknowledges on more than one occasion, is the statistical non-representativity of her sample,

"the conclusions from the study, therefore, should be extrapolated only with great caution to apply to other romance readers."<sup>95</sup>

echoed by Custen's modest claim to be "descriptive"<sup>96</sup> and Morley's reference to "a partially illustrative function".<sup>97</sup> Given the limited size of her sample and her calls for caution, however, Radway is at times perhaps a trifle presumptuous - or speculative - with her inferences. At the risk of labouring a marginal point, here is an example:

"Although 40 percent of the heavy readers (those who had read more than twenty-five books in the last six months) reported having read a romance, thus suggesting the possibility of a correlation of high levels of consumption and romance reading, the study gives no indication of how many of the romance readers actually read anywhere near the number the Smithton women report, which ranges from twenty-four to more than six hundred romances every six months. I think it is safe to say that the Smithton group's reliance on the romances is not strictly comparable to that of the occasional reader."<sup>98</sup> (my emphasis)

This stands in marked contrast to the statistical rigour which characterised the studies discussed in Section 4 above. Considering the contrast, it was probably a wise decision for Radway not to use any of her statistical material in her discussion of psychoanalytic theory.<sup>99</sup>

To return, lastly, to the problem of adequate 'proof'; at one point Radway reiterates her caution:

"I do not intend to minimize the difficulty of proving ... accuracy."<sup>100</sup>

and on the same page, as part of her discussion of the failure of some romances because of the nature of their portrayal of the male hero, she seems to base her argument on

"It seems entirely plausible .../... it might also suggest..."<sup>101</sup>

Perhaps it is unkind to criticise this kind of thing, but if I am to err through an overambitiously scientific orientation, it is at least reassuring to find traces of the same tendency in the respectable literature!

12. To conclude with three final observations about possible ways forward in my current research.

First there is the beguiling idea of using the model developed by Rosengren and Windahl<sup>102</sup> to try to address the needs satisfied by the Monty Python-comedic, preferably in specific instances, for individual viewers. Here some choice would need to be made about whether to concentrate on 'Monty Python fans' as Radway concentrated on habitual romance readers, or to look at a range of potential responses including rejection and indifference. As Morley points out, there is

"the necessity to recognize, in the first instance, the question of the viewers' positive or negative response to the text as a particular cultural form - do they enjoy it, feel bored by it, recognize it as at all relevant to their concerns? These questions need to be asked before exploring whether or not they 'agree, disagree or partly agree' with the ideological propositions of the text."<sup>103</sup>

We must also bear in mind that

"boredom is a political reaction which must always be analysed and understood."<sup>104</sup>

and that 'the political' is coextensive with the socioeconomic context which produces forms of repression and attitudes to the excremental/grotesque.

Secondly, we need to take on board the points made by Morley about the (re)introduction of notions of genre with regard to 'interpretive communities' (cf. pp.243-244 above). Each 'genre' or type of programme/film (Monty Python would here constitute a good example)

"requires the viewer to be competent in certain forms of knowledge and to be familiar with certain conventions which constitute the ground or framework within/on which particular propositions can be made."<sup>105</sup>

Clearly notions of cultural competence then become central. What kinds of people enjoy(ed) Monty Python at the time of the original TV series, and now? What kinds of cultural competences were then/are now likely to make a viewer part of such an interpretive grouping?

"Crucially these categories are to be defined in terms of forms of cultural competence: however, what is then to be explored is the way in which these cultural forms are distributed in relation to the social structural position of these different sections of the audience."<sup>106</sup>

Finally, the problem of what form the audience study should take now becomes a pressing concern. Our scrutiny of Radway's work has raised the question of what exactly can be got from an analysis of taped discussion. We must bear in mind that

"'Meaning' and 'interpretation' ... is a kind of viewer response to film that, as a speech event, is severely limited to specific conversational contexts (film-makers discussing a film, or persons in various states of coercion, such as research or classrooms ...) where talk about meanings may be expected to occur."

and that

"unless specifically called for - either by vocation or research context to name but two coercions - viewers' notions of 'meaning' inhere to the social use of film, and not merely its implied message."<sup>107</sup>

We are thus firmly back with Radway's dilemma of whether to impose a

template reflecting 'what we want to find out (about)' or whether to use the reader/viewer as a 'guide'.

Francesco Casetti writes of

"... a horizon which can very aptly frame the research on film when one decides (by simply following the spectator) to ask how the film entertains its interlocutor, how it founds his/her presence, organizes his/her action etc., in a word, how the film says 'you'."108

The question is, how to follow the spectator?



6.

The Research: Watching and talking about 'Meaning of Life'.

6.1 Introduction to the section.

As will probably have emerged, particularly in Section V above, there are serious difficulties and drawbacks associated with both 'effects' research and with the 'uses and gratifications' approach. It seems to me useful to combine what is 'correct' from both tendencies, and indeed the resulting 'critical' paradigm has been expressly favoured in much of the work which has developed over the last ten years.<sup>1</sup>

"The shared concern here is not so much with the media's effects on beliefs and values. The media are seen here as primary agencies of socialisation, whose function is to engineer consent to a 'dominant ideology', and thereby to contain and suppress opposition to the State and to the ruling class."<sup>2</sup>

While the dual nature of the 'critical' paradigm is implicit in much recent work in this area, it would have to be said that there has been a tendency in the research to neglect 'the audience' and to concentrate on the nature of media texts. We have seen above (pp.236-240) how the reading/viewing subject can be at the mercy of the tyrannical text, and how such a monolithic notion of the text as articulator of (only) dominant ideologies ignores the role of the decoder, of the audience.

This is probably in no small measure due to the nature of media 'effects' postulated within the critical paradigm; as ideological effects, they would generally be both more complex and more long-

term than the kinds of effects typically studied within the 'effects' tradition. The resulting problem is that

"... these ideological effects are far more diffuse and hard to identify; and in this sense, the hypotheses and assertions about the causal role of the media which are typically made by 'critical' researchers have been significantly difficult to prove in empirical terms."<sup>3</sup>

While this is true and represents a problem homologous to that identified in the Introduction there nevertheless remains, within this model, plenty of room for an emphasis on the audience, on active viewing/reading selection made on the basis of existing individual preferences.

The chief weakness which this brings is that related to 'needs': what sorts of 'needs' are being 'gratified', and at what level?

"The implicit assumption that there are basic, pre-existing human needs which the media satisfy ignores the possibility that the media themselves may create 'needs' and thereby perform an active ideological role. The reliance on asking individuals to state their own needs ignores the possibility that there may be 'unconscious' needs which they are unable or unwilling to acknowledge."<sup>4</sup>

Analysis and interpretation of discussion/interview material thus itself becomes a problem.

"The obvious way of finding out what someone thinks in response to television is to ask them. However, as most of us are aware, there is as large a gap between what we can put into words and what we think as there is between what we can do and how we can explain it. What we say is itself a set of meanings, which may or may not be what we really understand - and we may well understand more than we are ever conscious of."<sup>5</sup>

The empirical difficulty of working on long-term ideological effects is thus compounded by the unconscious nature of the reading/viewing process itself and the complexity of the 'needs' being serviced. The comedic and other pleasures of watching Monty

Python's Meaning of Life must have social functions, but also (as we have argued at length above in Section 2), psychological functions to do with repetition, discovery, and management of repression.

What kind of empirical work, then, could be undertaken in such a field? It may be worth indicating schematically three types of work which have typified the research in this area.

Laboratory experiments, designed in such a way as to offer the researcher maximum control over the factors which may influence the outcome, have most generally been concerned with the relation between two particular variables, for example blood-pressure and hours of TV watched per day. The emphasis has been (cf. Section 4 above, especially pp.186-187) on tight control of all other variables, on replicability, above all on quantitative measurement and rigorous statistical processing of all data. Control groups have been virtually mandatory. All of this has helped to confer on laboratory experiments an air of (sometimes spurious) scientificity.

We have observed some of the pitfalls of some of these more 'scientific' approaches in Section 4 above. There is a more general (and in this context fundamental) flaw in this mode of research. This is the artificiality of the 'laboratory experiments'; even if an impeccably designed experiment with excellent controls were to clearly demonstrate, for example, that male and female subjects did not differ in their humorous response to Monty Python, and even if that result was replicated, it would give little indication of how those subjects would behave in 'real life'. Film, television, and

other media coexist with many other factors which 'affect' attitudes and behaviour, so that

" ... while such experiments may indicate the factors which can influence behaviour, they are unable to identify with any certainty those which actually do - and as such, their predictive power is very limited."<sup>6</sup> (my emphasis)

Survey methods certainly appear to avoid this problem of artificiality, and to promise readier access to what is 'really' going on. In principle a survey method should be able to cover a larger group of subjects than a rigorous experiment, and could therefore claim to be more representative. The question of what 'scientific' status survey data can have is, however, a vexed one, and is largely dependent on the form of the survey material and on how it is administered. Clearly a highly structured questionnaire with a very limited response choice, administered under test conditions where random/spurious/careless responses could be minimised, would be most statistically acceptable, but what can be learned from such an exercise?

"Inevitably, the kinds of questions which are asked will tend to determine the kinds of responses which are obtained: if one is looking for particular 'effects', one is bound to design questions which maximise the chances of perceiving them, and thereby run the risk of exaggerating their importance."<sup>7</sup>

The more 'productive' survey mode would seem to be the taped interview or discussion. Since, however, this involves spending much more time with each (group of) respondent(s), the representativity of findings based on this kind of research becomes, for practical reasons, notional. The relatively enhanced resources enjoyed by Janice Radway and David Morley, whose work is exemplary in this area, did not enable them to overcome the labour-intensive nature of in-depth interviewing. The impetus is thus necessarily towards a

descriptive knowledge rather than any 'proof' or any quantitative demonstration.

Field experiments seek to eliminate the drawbacks of both the modes of research while retaining their strengths: subjects are observed in their 'natural' surroundings (at home, in a cinema, at work etc.) and one aspect of their environment is varied (for example a particular film is inserted into the evening's TV viewing). The key element here is the 'observation', *for it is difficult* to avoid either the need for some supplementary survey material on how the (film) was perceived/responded to, or the artificiality of some experimental observation procedure. The work of Peter Collett of Oxford University, which involved installing a video camera in each sample-household TV set so that whenever the television was on, the space in front of the set was recorded on videotape, seems like an excellent tool for this kind of research, though (again) one is faced with the impossible question: what would be happening if the camera was not there? Reservations also exist about what can be 'learned' from such an exercise; again it seems that the best way to find out about how people watch film/television is to ask them.

In terms of the three research methodologies outlined above, the model which I chose was closest to the 'survey' type. Subjects viewed Monty Python's Meaning of Life in what was technically a 'laboratory' setting, but which was hopefully relatively stress-free, approximating a 'social' event: perhaps somewhere between a laboratory and a field! Though a Mood Adjective Check List and a Humour Appreciation Test were administered in as standard a way as

possible, other elements of the research procedure remained more open-ended. An (optional) questionnaire was sent to all initial respondents, a semi-structured interview/discussion was recorded immediately after each screening, and indeed the interview material will constitute the bulk of the data discussed below. In these respects the considerable influence of Janice Radway's work is to be detected.<sup>8</sup>

The principal sections of this account of my research will deal with the preparation, the procedure, and the mode of analysis employed, and then with analysis of the interview tapes and of the other material.

## 6.2 Preparation

It was decided to use the material outlined in a provisional draught model prepared in early 1987. The Mood Adjective Check List (MACL) and the Humour Appreciation Test (HAT) were retyped and copied more or less verbatim, whereas some parts of the questionnaire were reworded before typing and copying. Copies of all three items are included in the Appendices.

As expected, the most feasible way of organizing the screenings and interviews was to arrange a number of (video) screenings for projected groups of 3-5 respondents, with a total sample of some 20-30 subject. It thus seemed sensible to plan for between five and eight separate screenings. A room with video and TV monitor facilities was booked at the University of London Extra-mural Department (32, Tavistock Square, London) for six sessions between 3rd and 13th

June 1987. The sessions were arranged for a variety of days and times to enable a maximum of potential respondents to attend. In addition to this, I expected to conduct two or three sessions at home for those who found this more convenient.

A prior choice had been made to eschew any attempt to look at a representative cross-section or systematically selected social group. It was decided instead that I should concentrate on 'heavy users', or at least on those with an interest in Monty Python. By placing advertisements in a few (*selected*) publications and on a few notice-boards, I hoped to solicit as many responses as possible, to send questionnaires to all those interested, and to obtain the desired sample of respondents for the screenings and interviews. The following advertisement was placed in 'City Limits' and 'Time Out' for the first week in May, and in 'Marxism Today' and in 'New Socialist' for May 1987:

"LOOKING FOR MONTY PYTHON. Wanted: respondents to help with audience research on comedy. tel. 0442 59852 (eves.)"

A longer version of the advertisement (advertising in magazines is expensive!) was also prepared:

"LOOKING FOR MONTY PYTHON. Are you a Monty Python fan? Or do you find Monty Python grotesque, infantile, unfunny? I am looking for respondents to help me with audience research on comedy. Please 'phone (0442) 59852 (evenings). Ask for Jan."

This appeared during May on the University of London notice-board in Malet Street, London, and at the same time on the Hemel Hempstead public library notice board. As a result of the latter placement I was approached by a reporter from the local newspaper and a report (complete with phone number and photograph) subsequently appeared in the Hemel Hempstead Gazette on 15th May 1987.

The response was (surprisingly) disappointing. While it is obvious that the choice of publications was bound to affect the volume and nature of replies to my advertisements, the extremely low level of interest was nevertheless (to me) unexpected.

The four magazines between them accounted for five responses, of which two were from teachers/writers themselves interested in comedy research; in the event four of these respondents completed the questionnaires, but none were able to take any further part in the research project.

There were no responses to the advertisement in the University of London Union. The local library card produced two enquiries, which resulted in one respondent who completed the questionnaire and later attended a screening/interview session. Interestingly, the local newspaper report attracted five responses and the possibility of eight questionnaires; eventually four questionnaires were returned and two people took part in a screening/interview.

The strategy of attracting a sample of respondents interested in Monty Python had clearly failed; it became urgently necessary to find an alternative.

Between September 1986 and April 1987 I had been a joint tutor for a University of London Extra-mural Department Diploma course in Film Studies. I had mentioned in passing that I was carrying out some research on Monty Python, and a few of the students had expressed interest. Some 30 students had begun the two-term course and about 20 were more or less there at the end. It seemed that the



socioeconomic/demographic profile of such a group of evening-class students should not differ too greatly from that one could have expected for the non-existent magazine respondents, and consequently it was decided to approach as many of the (ex) students as possible to solicit their co-operation.

None of the people who could be contacted in this way declined to help with the first part of the project, and so 20 questionnaires were sent out. Of these, 18 were returned completed, 3 with apologies for being unable to attend the subsequent screening/discussion session.<sup>9</sup> Of the remaining 15 respondents, 11 eventually attended the screening/interview.

In addition to this, three (non-British) friends and an ex-school colleague filled in the questionnaire and watched the film. The ex-colleague also took part in a discussion as an ordinary subject. One of the friends (a Monty Python fan from Germany) took part in a pilot session so that any problems with MACL/HAT administration or the mechanics of the interview could be sorted out before the first session proper. The results of the pilot session are included in Fig.6, which tabulates the number of respondents who took part at each stage.

Questionnaires were thus received completed from 31 respondents. Of these, 18 watched a video-tape of Monty Python's Meaning of Life, and 16 of the latter also took part in an 'interview' which was recorded for transcription and analysis.

### 6.3 Procedure

Five of the screening/interview sessions took place, then, at Tavistock Square between 3rd and 13th June 1987. In addition to the pilot session, two meetings were arranged at our home in Hemel Hempstead.

It is worth underlining here the observation made by a number of researchers about arranging for respondents to attend at a particular place and time. In this case the respondents were already (more or less) known to me; after an initial telephone call the questionnaires had been sent out, and most returned. Each person was then contacted, again by telephone, and a definite date and time arranged. Of the 15 London respondents who had expressed willingness to attend the screening, one could not be contacted. One did not attend the arranged session, then excused himself as unable to manage any other time. One simply didn't turn up. Another did not come, and again did not arrive for a rearranged date. Of the 11 who attended, one was at a rearranged date and one (L21) arrived 30 minutes late (cf. Fig.6). The final proportion of respondents taking part in the screening and interview was probably as high as it could have been given the commitments (and idiosyncrasies) of those involved; what we note here is the disproportionate amount of work that was needed in order to secure the actual audience that was used.

The screening/interview sessions were carried out in as informal/relaxed a manner as possible, but nevertheless within a framework where the MACL and HAT tests were always administered at the

Respondent no.	Questionnaire sent out	Questionnaire returned	Screening	MACL a b	HAT	interview
H1	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
H2	/	/	/	/ /	/	
H3	/					
H5	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
H6	/					
H7	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
H8 *	/	/				
H9	/	/				
H10	/					
H11	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
H12	/	/	/	/ /	/	
H13	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L1	/	/				
L2	/	/				
L3	/	/				
L4	/					
L5	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L6	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L7	/	/				
L8	/					
L9	/	/				
L10	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L11	/					
L12	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L13	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L14	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L15	/	/				
L16	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L17	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L18	/	/				
L19	/	/				
L20	/	/				
L21	/	/	/ **	/	/	/
L22	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L23	/	/	/	/ /	/	/
L24	/	/				
L25	/	/				

\* Two further questionnaires (unnumbered) were sent to H8 (friends/family were interested) but were returned uncompleted.

\*\* L21 was 30 minutes late for a screening at which he was the only subject. He said he knew the film well. We did not have time to view the entire film, and decided not to complete the MACL exercise. The last HAT entry is also missing (cf. Fig.10 below).

Fig.6 Respondents taking part in each part of the research project

same stage and in the same way. Each subject was welcomed with a glass of wine or fruit-juice, and when everyone was settled the first MACL test was given out, completed and collected. The subjects were then told that we would be watching a video of Monty Python's Meaning of Life, and some brief comment about whether they had seen it before, whether they had enjoyed it or not, etc. was encouraged. It was stressed that their responses were of equal interest whatever their feelings about the film. The HAT sheets were then handed out and the procedure of stopping the film at various points made clear.

A (VHS) tape of the film was then shown. There will be no attempt at any structural or content-analysis here;<sup>10</sup> a number of pertinent comments have punctuated the whole of this opus so far, and more will no doubt appear when we look at the interview transcripts. It may be as well at this point, however, to outline the diachronic sequencing of Meaning of Life<sup>11</sup> and to (re)define some of the salient points which will be of interest in the analysis below.

HAT 1 The film begins with a 'trailer' entitled 'The Crimson Permanent Assurance', directed by Terry Gilliam and with its own credit sequence. Lasting some 20 minutes, this is a conventional narrative about how the (elderly) employees of a ruthless conglomerate revolt against their younger overlords, take over the 'ship' and set out on the seas of international finance, there to extract good-hearted piratical revenge on their erstwhile competitors. The Python team do not appear in this 'sketch' except when Terry Gilliam and Michael Palin show up as bemused window-cleaners caught up in the Crimson Permanent Assurance's attack on the Very Big Corporation

of America; within the context of the swashbuckling musical that this clearly is, the various parts - the disgruntled elderly (echoes here of the TV Pythons' 'Hell's Grannies' etc.) and the heartless but ultimately weak young 'masters' - are played relatively 'straight'.

The section is a curiosity in Python terms, and seems to have been agreed on to indulge Terry Gilliam's directing experimentation. In the book of the film it appears within the body of the film, after the song which closes the 'Live Organ Transplants' section and before 'The Autumn Years'. In the video version at least, the whole narrative has become a 'trailer', though there is an interesting reference back to it (cf. pg.280 below).

HAT 2 For the purpose of the Humour Appreciation Test, a relatively large early part of the film was treated as one section, since the theme of 'sex' features quite prominently throughout these 30 or so minutes.

After a short opening sequence in which six fish (in an aquarium and each with an individual Python face and matching voice) greet each other and begin to speculate about "what's it all about ...", an animated title sequence explodes onto the screen. Eric Idle's rendition of the title song (complete with mock French accent and mock existential angst) is accompanied by a Gilliam animation encompassing conception, birth and carbon-copy socialisation. The style of the animation is similar to that of the original TV series, but more grandiose (Gilliam must have enjoyed himself with this).

A first intertitle then takes us into 'Part I: The Miracle of Birth'. In a clean and shiny hospital, doctors/gynaecologists John Cleese and Graham Chapman, with the help of some expensive-looking technology and chief administrator Michael Palin, 'deliver' a baby. The dehumanisation of the process and the marginalisation of the mother are clear themes here. We are quickly into 'The Miracle of Birth Part II: The Third World'.

This longer subsection is in two parts. First, Yorkshire mill-worker Michael Palin, newly destitute, arrives home to inform the seventy or so children of the family that he has to sell them all for scientific experiments. To explain how/why such a large number of children have accumulated, he (and wife Terry Jones) go into the 'Sperm Song', which has the refrain 'Every sperm is sacred': a hymn to Catholic refusal of contraception! The song is taken up by the children, and the scene shifts outdoors, with the entire neighbourhood (including many nuns) taking part in a song-and-dance extravaganza which ends on a suitably expansive crescendo. Back indoors, the children make one or two suggestions as to how their father's potency could be terminated, but the sequence ends with his confirming his sorry decision.

This first part is linked to the second as Protestants Mr. and Mrs. Blackitt (Graham Chapman and Eric Idle) watch the now disconsolate children filing out of their home, from a house across the road. Mr. Blackitt embarks on an anti-Catholic diatribe and sets up a definition of Protestantism couched entirely in terms of the freedom to wear a condom. His zeal leads him to describe with enthusiasm the kinds of sheaths he could buy from the local chemist

(if he wanted to). The rigid repression of sexual drives is made more explicit by the surprised (and increasingly lustful) comments of Mrs. Blackitt.

At one point in his discourse Mr. Blackitt refers to Martin Luther:

"When Martin Luther nailed his protest up to the church door in 1517, he may not have realized the full significance of what he was doing. But four hundred years later, thanks to him ... I can wear whatever I want on my John Thomas."

In view of the significance of Luther in the development of modern forms of psychic repression and anality,<sup>12</sup> this reference in the film text is beguiling. It is particularly unfortunate, therefore, (though in itself interesting) that the next section from the 'book of the film' was entirely missing from the video version which we used.

According to the book, there is no inter-title for this section; the title 'The Adventures of Martin Luther' would have appeared as a mock title-sequence ('in Reform-o-scope'). Following this, a stereotypically Jewish couple (Mamie/Graham Chapman and Hymie/Michael Palin) is visited by Martin Luther (Terry Jones). He is intent of using "the john"(or pretends to be). There are some jokes about food, constipation and excrement. When Luther realizes that two daughters of the family are indoors, he redoubles his efforts to get in, offering to do some cleaning, to be shown some cutlery ("Cutlery is really my thing now. Girls with round breasts is over for me"). When he manages to talk his way indoors, the cutlery (spoons!) as displaced object of desire is gradually forgotten, and

finally he is permitted to get his hands, not on the daughters, but on Mamie.

Whatever this absent sequence would have furnished in the way of subject response in the interview sessions, it remains a fascinating (knowing) piece of 'play' with the familiar elements of anality, sexuality, displacement and religion.

An intertitle introduces us to Part II: 'Growth and Learning'. At a boy's school chapel service, the chaplain, (Michael Palin) leads the school in a parodic prayer, and the headteacher (John Cleese) makes a short speech. A hymn ("Oh, Lord, please don't burn us") then links the chapel to a classroom, where John Cleese presides over a lesson about sexual foreplay and intercourse, to which the boys (among them Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, Terry Jones and Michael Palin) react with characteristic indifference. Sexually explicit descriptions are given and treated casually. An interesting visual aid is produced when the blackboard is lowered to reveal a four-poster bed, and John Cleese and wife (Mrs. Williams) proceed to demonstrate sexual intercourse. The boys' interest remains minimal, and eventually Biggs (Terry Jones) gets caught laughing about something, and his punishment is to be selected for the boys' rugby team which is to play against the masters.

HAT 3 A jump-cut takes us suddenly out of the classroom into the conflict of a one-sided rugby match (which, curiously, is represented in the book of the film only by a double-page photograph uncharacteristic of the sequence). The watching 'masters' gleefully celebrate the brutal mauling administered by their side. In terms



of the sort of comedicity being introduced here, this sequence clearly belongs with Part III: 'Fighting Each Other', which then arrives with the ellipsis of Biggs/Terry Jones covering his eyes in the despair of mudstained humiliation and uncovering them to find himself still mudstained but amidst the serious violence of trench warfare.

In the sequence which follows, Biggs and five soldiers under his command (played by most of the rest of the Python team) are under fire and about to make a run from their scant cover. "In case we don't meet again", the devoted soldiers, oblivious to the exposed position, produce a series of presents and a card for their beloved leader. When they discover they've left the cheque in another trench and suggest going back to get it, Biggs' reaction is "forget it, man". At this, the men turn against Biggs, threaten not to give him the cake they have baked, and expose the class rift between officers and men. When two of the men have been hit by passing bullets, Biggs relents and decides they must eat the cake then and there. As preparations for the party get under way, all the soldiers are more or less seriously injured, the camera pulls away to show Biggs struggling to get the cake onto a table amid the noise and smoke of warfare, and the sequence is interrupted by a General (Graham Chapman) who reveals that this was a film which he was projecting. There follows a periodic "Why we need an army" sketch, and a sequence in which sergeant-major Michael Palin, having asked a squad of recruits what they would rather be doing than marching up and down the square, eventually finds himself marching up and down the square alone.

The next section is set up as an illustration of the "calm leadership of the upper class" in war. While the fighting and bloodshed of "the Zulu War" rage around, officers John Cleese and Michael Palin and army doctor Graham Chapman have their own problem: colleague Eric Idle has a troublesome mosquito bite. The doctor tries to reassure him, but it is eventually decided that a search party should leave to search for Idle's missing leg (the fighting has stopped by now, the British as well as the Zulus having sustained heavy and ghastly casualties). It has become obvious that a tiger has run away with the leg, and indeed before long the search party believe they have found their quarry. This, however, turns out to be not a real tiger but Eric Idle and Michael Palin as front and rear ends of a tiger-costume. After a discussion about how they came to be hiding in the jungle in their costume, and about where officer Idle's leg may be, the section is brought to a close by Terry Gilliam, who first appears encased in an 'African native' carapace, then removes it to reveal himself as a white dinner-jacketed announcer, and welcomes us to the Middle of the Film.

HAT 4 This HAT section is a perhaps uneasy mixture of the absurd and the gruesome. First a 'Lady TV Presenter' (Michael Palin) introduces the 'Middle of the Film', which is to be a game of 'Find the fish'. While the sound-track is a nonsense-doggerell verse ("I wonder where that fish has gone ... It went wherever I did go ... It is a most elusive fish ..."), the camera tracks in through the doors of a large mansion; inside we are further exhorted to find the fish while Terry Jones (as a bizarre waiter with false arms and painted whiskers), Graham Chapman (in bizarre fetishistic drag and a red wig) and someone else (with a rubber elephant's head

and outsize hands and feet) parade before us. The interior looks like an ornate power station, filmed with the help of some disorientating/distorting lenses.

We return at this point to the six fish we met at the start of the film. They are very enthusiastic about the 'Find the Fish' section, but then express doubts as to whether the film is in fact going to deal with the Meaning of Life at all.

In Part IV: 'Middle Age', Mr. and Mrs. Hendy (Michael Palin and Eric Idle) are an American couple (of a predictably awful kind) who visit a 'Super Inn' hotel restaurant, with genuine Hawaiian food served in an authentic English mediaeval dungeon atmosphere. A sequence in which a waitress takes their order was missing from the video version which we used. This seems odd since even if the waitress' parting "Have a nice fuck!" and the reference to "Super Inn Skins" were deemed censorable, there seems to be no good reason for removing the rest of the scene.

The rest of the sequence involves a waiter (John Cleese) trying to start the couple off on a conversation, and the couple's failure to get to grips with a conversation about the Meaning of Life. Eventually the waiter suggests a conversation which is not on the menu: Live Organ Transplants.

Part V of Meaning of Life is 'Live Organ Transplants'. On the pretext that Mr. Bloke (Terry Gilliam) has a liver donor's card, two men (not doctors) (John Cleese and Graham Chapman) force their way into the Bloke family's home and proceed to remove his liver. As we

see blood flying everywhere and various internal organs being removed (and put back?), Mrs. Bloke (Terry Jones) enters and discusses the matter with the two men. She offers them a cup of tea and John Cleese goes with her to the kitchen ("I thought she'd never ask!"). Here he proposes that they could also take her liver. When she appears rather hesitant, John Cleese opens the fridge to reveal a debonair Eric Idle. The latter goes for a walk with Mrs. Bloke around the stars and sings a 'magnitude of the universe' song. This includes an animated graphics sequence showing an archetypal woman conceiving and giving birth. Back in the kitchen, the 'distinguished vocalist' returns to the fridge and Mrs. Bloke, convinced of her cosmic insignificance, agrees that the two men can have her liver.

HAT 5 The next HAT section is made up of two parts, though its comedic interest resides predominantly in the excrementality of the second part.

First we attend part of a meeting of the 'Very Big Corporation of America'. As we have noted (pp.272-273 above), it is as an interruption to this meeting that the 'Crimson Permanent Assurance' section was probably first conceived. In the version which we used, however, the meeting is interrupted by an attack from the said Assurance company,<sup>13</sup> but after a short fight sequence there is an announcer-voice apology for this invasion by the supporting feature, and the pirates' ship is flattened by a falling skyscraper.

An intertitle then introduces Part VI: 'The Autumn Years'. In a posh restaurant, 'not Noel Coward' (Eric Idle) sings the 'Penis

Song', much to the genteel pleasure of the 'sophisticated' audience. Then, to the great consternation of the fish, Mr. Creosote (Terry Jones) arrives. He is more than grotesquely overweight. As the Maitre D (John Cleese) takes his order, he vomits several times, into a bucket, onto a cleaning-woman and onto the menu. Eventually the unperturbable head waiter has his (gross) order. A cut takes us to the end of the meal; Mr. Creosote, with a table full of stacks of plates, a battery of bottles, and other assorted debris before him, is visibly full. John Cleese coaxes him into having one wafer-thin after-dinner mint. Mr. Creosote explodes, and his meal, together with some internal organs, is graphically deposited over the surrounding tables and customers. As the distressed customers flee, retching, from the room, John Cleese calmly approaches the eviscerated Mr. Creosote (still sitting on his chair) with the bill.

HAT 6 An intertitle introduces Part VIB: 'The Meaning of Life'. In the aftermath of Mr. Creosote's fragmentary departure, the restaurant staff are clearing up the mess. Maître D (John Cleese) listens as the cleaning-woman (Terry Jones) recites a rhyming description of (her) jobs in various well-known libraries, museums etc. When (she) ends on "At least I don't work for Jews", John Cleese empties a bucket of vomit over (her) head. Then, as he insists that he can explain, the camera pans away and seeks out a waiter (Eric Idle) who is pensively smoking a cigarette. With stereotypical French accent, he offers to show us something, and leads the camera crew out of the restaurant, through the town and into the countryside. Sheepishly he shows us the place where he was born, and explains the philosophy of love which his mother inculcated in him. "And so ... I became a waiter." After a lengthy

pause during which he smiles and nods at the camera with growing unease, he walks off angrily: "... it's not much of a philosophy, I know ... but ... well ... fuck you! ... don't come following me!"

An intertitle then precedes the final section of the film: Part VII: 'Death'. First, in a brief piece of (minimal) animation, we see an autumn tree: a male voice (suitably distraught) decides it's all too much, it has to be suicide. A scream is heard as a single leaf falls. The process is repeated with a female voice, then with the two orphaned children. Four leaves lie on the ground. After a pause which is neither short nor long, every leaf on the tree crashes to the ground with one accord.

There is a rapid cut to a man (Graham Chapman) running wildly through/among disused warehouses, to a chase-music track. Throughout the sequence which follows, the editing is that of a typical chase. A dramatic male voice tells us that this man is about to die; we learn that, having been convicted of making gratuitous sexist jokes in a moving picture, he has chosen to die while being chased by twelve topless (attractive) young women (who are also wearing crash-helmets and knee- and elbow-padding). The chase, during which one slow-motion shot focuses on the womens' breasts, is intercut with Michael Palin and a group of the man's relatives/friends standing solemnly round a grave on a beach at the foot of a cliff. As the chase reaches a peak of excitement, the man plunges over the cliff and plummets neatly into his grave.

There is a cut to an evocative sequence of the Grim Reaper waiting in a bleak landscape. The book of the film points out that

"Ingmar Bergman now takes over the direction of the film". The Grim Reaper (a completely concealed John Cleese), alias 'Death', arrives at an isolated house where a dinner party is going on. All the other Pythons are present, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, Eric Idle in drag (suavely, even attractively so!). No-one in the group understands who the cloaked figure is, or why he is there. It requires some time, and a deal of argument for him to convince them that they are dead and that he has come to take them away. Eventually he succeeds in leading their spiritual forms out of the house. He is slightly surprised when they get into their cars, but lets them use this means of transport to follow him up through the skies to heaven. Here the Grim Reaper disappears and the new arrivals are left to their own devices.

In this heaven, the reception area of which is the same as that of the 'Super Inn' restaurant of an earlier sequence, characters from the rest of the film are assembled. A lavish song-and-dance number "It's Christmas in Heaven", with Graham Chapman as 'not Tony Bennett', is performed, intercut with brief TV-musical skits. Suddenly, before the number can end, the image and sound are abruptly cut, and the camera pulls back to reveal a TV set which has just been switched off, beneath the caption 'The End of the Film'. The 'Lady Presenter' of the Middle of the Film informs us that this is the end of the film, and opens an envelope to read out the secret of the meaning of life. This turns out to be "Try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and live together in harmony with people of all creeds and nations." With some tart comments about the perverted tastes of the video-sated public, "where's the fun in pictures?",

(she) bids us goodnight. The credits roll to a reprise of the 'magnitude of the universe' song, and end with a caption thanking all the fish who have taken part and exhorting all fish to strive for a more peaceful coexistence with other fish.

At the end of the film, the TV monitor was switched off and the HAT sheets collected. Before any conversation/comments could ensue, a second MACL, identical to the first, was administered.

The subjects were then offered another glass of wine or fruit juice, and the audio tape-recorder was turned on. The semi-structured discussion which followed was recorded. After the first two sessions it seemed that 45 minutes would be an adequate discussion period, but when two groups later continued enthusiastically beyond this time, no attempt was made to curtail the session.

#### 6.4 Modes of Analysis

Before proceeding to a more detailed account of the analysis and interpretation of the empirical data, it may be appropriate to comment on how and why the analysis took the form it did.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the planning and development of the research material, the original impulse to find some way of quantifying psychoanalytically relevant data was retained. It soon became clear, however, that the questionnaires could not provide an adequate base for any quantitative study of the responses elicited in discussion.



It was therefore decided that the emphasis should be placed on the descriptive mode favoured by David Morley and by Janice Radway, among others, with respondents' comments, explications or opinions taking centre stage. The open-interview format, constrained only by occasional refocussing where discussion faltered or veered off elsewhere, was thus confirmed as the most suitable mode for gleaning subject response.<sup>15</sup>

During the transcription of the interview tapes it became clear that there were a number of strands running unevenly through the discussions, mirroring, echoing and contradicting one another, and emerging more or less strongly at various points. The decision was taken to take each 'strand' in turn and to look at how it was handled by the different subjects/groups.

The more quantifiable MACL and HAT findings, together with some data from the questionnaires, could then subsequently be interrogated in the light of such an analysis of the interview-transcripts.

#### 6.5 Analysis of tape transcripts

##### a) Interpretive communities, viewing contexts and cultural capital

At various points throughout the interviews - sometimes in responding to a direct question, sometimes more or less 'spontaneously' - the respondents commented on the level of intellectual and other sophistication needed for appreciating Monty Python, and on the groups (interpretive communities) which would have access to such cultural capital. It is not possible to develop an adequate

index of cultural capital here;<sup>16</sup> since, however a number of the respondents refer in the discussions to their own experiences, some of the biographical data from the questionnaires may be useful in furnishing a profile to give us some access to the cultural mappings of individual respondents (cf. Fig.7).<sup>17</sup>

The need for shared assumptions, needs, sense of humour etc. by an 'interpretive community' was identified by a number of respondents, many of whom remembered the role of the TV Monty Python series of 1969-74 in their social lives. Thus

"... you've got to be attuned to that kind of humour to begin with ..." (L13,71)<sup>18</sup>

or

"... it's just you know, taste in humour is, certain people like certain things and not others; but also if you're in a peer-group, you know that you're all in tune to what your humour is, so there are things that you can work off each other, but if you're ... just with people you don't know very well, sometimes things that would be funny somewhere else just don't ... work, because of peoples' attitudes towards humour ..." (L6,91). (cf. also L12,113)

The shared cultural capital of such interpretive groupings was also identified. There was much discussion of the 'filmic references' employed in Meaning of Life;

"... if you are a movie buff you enjoy it even more than someone who doesn't go very often to the cinema ..." (L16,68)

The pleasures of recognition were overlaid by the satisfaction of belonging to a privileged interpretive group, though distinctions could also be made within that group. Thus one respondent, in recalling the 'cult' status of Monty Python's Flying Circus:

Fig.7a Some cultural-capital indicators for respondents taking part in screenings/interviews.

resp. no.	gender	age group	first language	other language	ethnic self descriptor	formal education	parents' occupation
H1	F	30-39	German	English (French)	white	grammar-school, university teacher-training	m: housewife f: owner small factory
H5	F	20-29	English	(German)	white	comprehensive school	m: mail-order clerk f: unemployed
H7	M	20-29	English	-	white	secondary modern 4 years art college	m: office worker f: carpenter
H11	M	30-39	English	(French)	white	grammar-school, part-time f.e. coll.	m: housewife f: process operator
H13	M	40-49	English	-	white	grammar-school, poly, further degree(s)	accountant
L5	M	20-29	English	French	white	comprehensive, grammar school, university PGCE	security guard
L6	M	20-29	English	-	Jewish	university degree	m: housewife, part-time retail f: glass/pottery retail
L10	M	20-29	English	-	white	secondary modern	teaching
L12	F	30-39	English	French	white	f.e. coll. poly	m: housewife f: local government
L13	M	30-39	English	-	white	comprehensive university further degree	f: in 'forces' then teaching
L14	F	40-49	English	-	white	university degree (part-time)	teacher and civil servant
L16	M	40-49	(French)	English	white	secondary modern f.e. coll.	-
L17	F	30-39	English	(French)	white	grammar-school, university degree	f: marine engineering consultant
L21	M	< 20	English	(Spanish) (German)	white	comprehensive	m: runs antique shop f: manages travel agency
L22	M	20-29	English	-	white Lithuanian	public school f.e./h.e. college	m: actor f: theatre director
L23	M	30-39	English	-	white	MSc	university teacher secondary teacher

Fig.7b Some cultural-capital indicators for respondents taking part in screenings/interviews.

resp. no.	own occupation	newspaper(s) preferred	daily access TV	daily access video	est. TV hrs/day	cinema-going	main interests and pastimes
H1	teaching adults	Frankfurt Rundschau	✓	✓	1-2	rare	reading, knitting, films, plants, travelling, talking with friends
H5	instructor at day-centre	Daily Mail (Today)	✓	✓	virtual none	rare	socialising, records, films, theatre, keep fit, reading
H7	instructor day-centre	locals (Daily Express, Mail)	✓	X	1-2	rare	motorcycling, draw/painting, photography, socialising
H11	engineer	Guardian Observer (Today)	✓	✓	virtual none	rare	painting, goat-keeping, model-engineering, walking
H13	art teacher	Guardian Sunday Times (Sun, Mirror, Telegraph)	✓	X	2-3	rare	gardening, walking, reading, photography
L5	English	Guardian Mirror London Daily News	✓	✓	1-2	rare	cinema, music, sport
L6	ophthalmic optician	Guardian Observer	✓	✓	2-3	1/week	films, records, DJing, photography, bars and night-clubs
L10	marketing	Guardian Observer locals	✓	✓	1-2	1/week	films, photography, walking
L12	editing film/TV study material	Guardian Observer	✓	✓	2-3	rare	reading, tap-dance, music, singing, guitar, gardening, film/TV, theatre, cooking cakes
L13	hostel warden, writer for media press	Guardian (Independent) Times Standard	✓	✓	1-2	1-2/week	films, eating out, guitar, music
L14	library	Guardian Observer (Times) (Independent)	✓	✓	1-2	1/week	painting, writing, film-making and viewing, music, theatre, canals, eating out, pubs
L16	accountant	Guardian Observer London Daily News	✓	X	3-4 (or none)	4-5/week	1. cinema, 2. travelling, walking, reading, theatre, museum, friends, good restaurant
L17	magazine journalist	Guardian Independent Standard News of the World	✓	X	1	2/week	cinema, theatre, travel, drama workshops, appear in revues, reading biographies
L21	school student	Standard Sunday Express (Guardian) London Daily News	✓	✓	2-3	1-2/week	sport, collect medals, records, horror film material (press, stills, posters)
L22	freelance carpenter furniture maker	Guardian Observer News of the World	✓	✓	3-4	1/week	cinema, reading
L23	systems programmer	Guardian Observer News on Sunday	X	X	none	3/week	reading, films, swimming

"... at college (there) used to be a cult thing, but the cult obviously widened, ... we used to sit and watch it in the students' Union building, and like five hundred people watching it, and it was very interesting to see what bits people laughed at ... and some of the very obvious jokes, like sort of, anal humour type things, there were people that would be ... , literally sort of rolling on the floor; but some of them didn't understand the more subtle intellectual type things ... , that became the cult of the cult, ... do you remember the Jean-Paul Sartre sketch, the laundry, and then there's Mrs. Cardboard Cut-out ... which I think is hilariously funny ..." (L12,106-107)

A level of intellectual sophistication was seen as necessary for 'understanding' some of the sketches.

"... you just need to know who he is, that he's French, and that he was a philosopher, and he was sixty years trying to find out if he was free or not ... if you don't know that, you can't laugh at that joke, it means nothing ..." (L12,107)

Indeed one respondent, speculating about the obviously contrived 'structure' of Meaning of Life:

"I mean, it's so blatant ... if they're expecting people to understand their philosophical references, I'm sure they expected people to realize that it is cobbled together, and it's just a joke, I mean it's so obviously done, that they must know that the person who understands the references to xyz philosophers can say ... God ... they're just taking the piss ..." (L5,108)

and playfully identified this as a marketing device:

"... I suppose it might have been a ... marketing ploy .../... to get everybody in, and ... , part of the running joke was the fact that these sketches were just so ridiculously, the connections were so tenuous between the title and what the sketch was about, I mean that was part of the joke ..." (L5,108-109)

The same respondent, however, was also one of at least four for whom Monty Python was (or had become) somewhat childish, the humour clearly the product of a pampered Oxbridge mafia. While it was generally agreed that the audience for the original TV series and for the films had been 'young', the ageing of that original audience

clearly poses problems as regards its 'faithfulness' to a previous more youthful enthusiasm for Monty Python. The following view met with agreement from L22 and L23:

"... that scene with the fish thing, when they were talking about 'where's the fish?', ... that's the sort of Monty Python that I remember from the television series, and yet it was, ... I just thought it was rubbish .../... I hadn't thought about that in terms of the television programmes before, but ... , it almost seemed to me to be very school-boyish sort of humour, and I didn't really like that bit at all, it wasn't very good ..." (L6,82)

Individual comedic preferences change with time, and more than one respondent felt that Monty Python had not kept pace:

"... I remember watching it when I was young, it was ... like a treat, but it was quite a naughty thing to watch, 'cos it was on so late Sunday nights as I remember it, when it first started .../... and it was, please, can I stay up late, used to have to beg to be allowed to watch it, ... and it was really funny then and I went through, ... the grammar schools as it happens, and it was very funny; all through school, kids learning sketches off by heart, the parrot sketch; and it was very funny! But ... , they didn't seem to have moved on at all, they seemed to be, ... , using past glories, sort of trying to push ..." (L5,94)

This impression was reinforced by the same respondent's description of "Cambridge boys being really clever" (L5,99) and again in a later identification of the tenuousness of the 'intellectual' content: L5 first questioned L12's valorisation of 'intellectual' references in Monty Python, then made this distinction:

"... it's satire of quite a ... reasonably high knowledge-level, not necessarily intellectual ..." (L5,107)

In our limited sample, then, a number of subjects identified themselves as having first watched Monty Python on TV as members of particular interpretive groups, typically schoolchildren and students. The group-cohesive activity of rote learning of sketches was described a number of times, for example as a "club of Monty Python fans" (H5).

For a minority of respondents, however, a liking for Monty Python had grown later, from a relative indifference to the original TV series. H5 and H7 were among those who showed the most visible signs of enjoying Meaning of Life, yet H7 was not initially very amused; he could

"... remember being fascinated by them; ... it was totally different from any other sort of childlike humour on TV at the time, ... I suppose over the years I must have seen quite a bit of the old series, 'cos they've been repeated .../... when I started secondary school I had a group of friends that used to sit and recite things parrot-fashion, which after a while took the edge off, the funny edge off ... I can remember just being amazed ... I wasn't rolling about on the floor ... I was thinking, crikey! really different ..." (H7,20)

We shall return to other observations about the relation between novelty and funniness below, but it is interesting that for this subject amusement did develop:

"I'd certainly appreciate it more now than I did when I was younger ... I liked it ... but I found it perhaps fascinating when I was younger .../... I find it a lot more humorous and enjoyable (on the whole) now ..." (H7,22)

This respondent thus seemed to distance himself a little from the more 'typical' accounts, and this was reinforced by his view of the Monty Python audience, delivered after a particularly long pause.

"Maybe a fairly wide group of people but for different reasons, ... it's not like certain comedy series that you know will be the same all the way through ... I mean it will always be slightly different and ... wacky, way out, or whatever, but things will be, varied every week, it won't be like a sitcom ... it won't be like Benny Hill, where you know the jokes are going to be roughly the same every week, it won't be that sort of things, so I suppose it could appeal to a wider variety of people at different times ... all those people would sit down and watch it all at once, to get their one little bit out of it all at the same time, ... I don't think you can just say it'll be just those sort of people who'll like it ..." (H7,20)

Was this respondent undervaluing the 'intellectual' component, or were some others overvaluing it? In any case, this particular

respondent is clear about how the interpretive community for Monty Python has extended over the years:

"I think now, because of the time-span that it's been on, there's obviously a wider age-group of people that appreciate it now, but at the time, maybe that age-group was a lot slimmer ..."(H7,22)

A more radical example of self-distancing in relation to the Monty Python audience was provided by the youngest respondent, who was about to take A-levels at school.

"It'd be type-casting myself as a certain person ... 'cos whatever I say, in generalising as a Monty Python fan, I would have to be careful that ... it's the opposite of me ... 'cos I wouldn't class myself as a Monty Python fan, but what I would class as a typical Monty Python fan, I would see as being different to myself ... yes, the typical Monty Python fan ... he would enjoy sort of alternative humour ... which is a sort of label term ... possibly rebellious against society ... possibly someone who ... who has restricted himself, restricted their emotions, and can find outlets through the kind of humour that Monty Python depicts ..."(L21,39)

The "restricted emotions" will be of interest below, particularly in view of the striking refusal to identify with an interpretive community; we are reminded of the parallel pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu and by Klaus Theweleit between the bourgeois use of linguistic distinction and the bourgeois relation to the body.

In keeping with the characterisation of the typical Monty Python audience as young/student, a number of the students recalled more or less serious disagreements with elders/parents. Thus

"I can remember watching that with ... my friend who was the son of the local vicar ... I remember his father getting up and turning it off because he was so pissed off with it ..."(L13,69)

"... I was at home with my family last Saturday, and I know that my mother doesn't find it very funny, though she's got a very good sense of humour, we can giggle like two school-girls together, and she's seventy, ... but she doesn't



understand, ... the poking fun at establishment type jokes .../... but you've still got to be probably below a certain age to appreciate that, below whatever age they are, mid-forties, probably, because there's a real kind of generation gap there, ..." (L12,106)

The common experience of an older generation's rejection/incomprehension of 'new', 'different' taboo-breaking material was to some extent replicated. The example

"... I remember watching it when I was young, it was almost like a treat, but it was quite a naughty thing to watch, 'cos it was on so late Sunday nights as I remember it, ... and it was please, can I stay up late, you used to have to beg to be allowed to watch it, because my big brother watched it ..." (L5,94)

however, contains an odd ambiguity (a signifying absence?) about the actual parental response. Were the parents also enjoying the 'naughtiness', or were they part of its butt? In the case of one of the youngest respondents, parents appreciated the original TV series and the daughter ("I've always wanted to be older than I was ...") identified with their cultural norms rather than those of her wider peer-group.

"... when I got into it I was ... in second or third year at junior school, and me and my friend got into it and a few of the friends at school, but ... it certainly seemed a more adult humour because we played it in junior school once ... and the teacher found it really funny ... I think it was five of us who found it really funny, and all the other ... classroom of kids were looking blankly; they couldn't understand it, it sort of went right over their heads, and there was just like our little crowd really laughing, and the teacher really finding it funny, ... I suppose I found it was normally people older than me at the time, when I was at junior school, ... only a minority of people my age liked it, it was more older people; perhaps that's what attracted it to me as well ... 'cos it was older people, ... my dad enjoyed it, and my mum enjoyed it, and my sister ... and I found it funny, so it made me feel perhaps a bit more grown up ... " (H5,21)

Though this last is an isolated example, it highlights the need, in accounting for the development of individual viewing tastes/preferences, for close attention to the cultural capital made

available in the home. Interpretive communities may be forged by exposure to formal education and by the exigencies of working and social relationships, but their foundations are surely often secured in the earlier years at home.

b) Comedic forms and functions

In Section 2 above we addressed the distinctions between jokes and the comic, and we looked at the social and psychoanalytic functions that different forms of comedicity could fulfil. In discussion with the respondents, the joke/'comic' distinction proved very difficult to elucidate; subjects were more at home with the social/psychological effectivity of humour. At this point we shall try to restrict ourselves to the more general comments on form and function, leaving specific pleasures and the function of particular areas of comedicity (e.g. the excremental) until later.

b) (i) general observations on comedic forms

The distinction between 'jokes' and 'the comic' and whether a film such as Meaning of Life could usefully be discussed in such terms (Jean-Paul Simon's film-esprit and film-comique) was not really taken up by most respondents, though two comments were made about the relative absence of jokes:

"... I was thinking I wish they'd have a few one-liners ...  
the individual lines just aren't quite funny enough ..."  
(L17,25)

and, in talking about the slowness of the 'Zulu War' sketch:

"... I want to see what's happened to his leg ... whereas if you'd put a ... huge jokes in there, you wouldn't give a sod about the leg, would you ..."(H13,50)

L21 initially answered the question "What do you think of as 'jokes' in a film - in Meaning of Life" with

"... there wasn't really that much I would have ... I imagined it to be funny when I first saw it, but seeing it this time there wasn't really that much I was exceptionally funny ..."(L21,36)

When we returned to the question, his response was

"... in a comedy film I wouldn't say so much a joke, it's more visual, in a film; if you ... watch something like Saturday Live, ... then that's when I would say, more the actual spoken joke would be more funny, but in a film I'd say 99% it's more visual ... it wouldn't really be a film if it was just ... bloke reading off jokes here and there ..."(L21,36)

and, shortly after this,

"... if you think about lines, I suppose that one that will probably be more vivid would probably be the 'Fighting Each Other', ... they're being killed off one by one, and he's asking them to go and get ... things, and that's where the actual spoken joke I think was more funny, although the presenting of the clocks, the visual joke, was also funny ..."(L21,37)

Though this respondent also later referred to a preference for the one-liners and 'visual humour' of Only Fools and Horses, it was not possible to define the 'visual joke' with any precision.

There were some (unprompted) references to sequences of the film as extended 'jokes'. Thus for one respondent the 'Grim Reaper' sequence was "a but unsubtle ... the one joke went on ..."(L17,26), and L16 repeatedly used "it's a joke" to describe particular moments in the film. We have also already noted L5's comment on the artificial structure of the film: "it's a joke"(L5,108). In fact this was the one respondent who attempted to define a joke: after asking "What does a joke entail?" and encountering a long pause, I had 'joked', "You're not going until you've told me!" While I was

working towards a Freudian definition of a joke, L5 maintained that my comment was a joke:

"I mean you're taking ... the unexpected, taking a situation, and giving it an apparent context, and suddenly you change it ... I'd have said it was a joke ..." (L5,110)

This formulation fits well in the 'incongruity' category (cf. pp. 69-70 above) and indeed recalls Koestler's 'bisociation' model.

One respondent picked up an important aspect of the conventional joke-telling situation.

"... it's a two-way process ... someone can tell me a fairly indifferent joke and I will kind of laugh at it because ... it will be more infectiously funny, even though it actually isn't very funny ..." (L13,78)

Though the other one present continued with

"Michael Palin is talking at the end, you know ... there's nothing visual, he's saying something ... it makes you laugh, ... that's a kind of joke, OK we see him but there's no equivalent on the screen of the joke, ... he is only saying something ... or like when they are all like fishes inside the aquarium ..." (L16,78)

we did not get any further with this idea.

One group (L5, L12, L14 - and especially the first two) made a number of interesting comments about the 'joke' question. At one point they embarked on an animated discussion of gender and power structures in relation to humour and joking.

"... I'm not quite sure why ... but I suspect there's a strongly misogynist thread that runs through all that; and I find I have to step back from it to laugh ... I do find them funny ..." (L14)

"... don't you think there is in a lot of humour anyway? because humour is male and mainstream?" (L12)

"Oh yes, I was just going to say ... all of this is really from a masculine point of view .../... the one we were watching here, we're seeing a man's point of view again ..." (L14,102)

It is odd that this respondent (L14), having introduced this subject so succinctly, subsequently said so little on the matter. When the group later got 'stuck' on the question of the joke/comic distinction, I delivered a short monologue on the Freudian model (chorus of L5, L12, L14: "What does Freud say?!").<sup>19</sup> The group immediately returned to the 'masculinist bias' of joking:

"But there is a kind of ... psychological cathartic release, isn't there, as you may not be able to say directly what you'd like to say, and therefore it's kind of disguised, ... displaced ... but, Freud, classic, you know, always from the male point of view ... in the last few years, women have now found their voice publicly, in terms of being able to tell jokes; because it was always a sort of male myth ... that women didn't have a sense of humour; they weren't allowed to because they always had to be the butts of male jokes."  
(L12,110)

and identified as positive the emergence of women comedians such as Victoria Wood, laughing and poking fun at men.

"... the thing is that the woman is in the actual active position rather than the passive recipient, ... it's reversed ..."(L12,111)

When I suggested that "poking fun at" or "laughing at" may correspond more to Freud's 'comic' than to 'joking', the problem of distinguishing between the two modes in a film seemed insuperable and the discussion took another turn. A rather essentialist view of humour was taken up by at least two of the group:

"... we're saying ... that there are certain elements in humour that are there, and will always be there, and that's the human condition, you will always laugh when you're triggered off by one of those elements, ... it doesn't matter if you go back forty years or back to Hogarth or whatever, there are certain things that people perennially, universally will find funny ..."(L12,114)

One disquisition from this very articulate (and talkative) subject can stand as a paradigm of the more or less untheorised

refusal of the 'joke' as having any place in Meaning of Life.

"... when we talk about humour I don't think of jokes, I don't think jokes are particularly funny ... if I try and remember them, I tend to get the punchlines wrong, or something, ruined it; ... it's the situations that arise from real life that are funnier; it's the ironies and the expectations that aren't met, are undercut, which I think are funnier ... the sketches aren't really, based around a joke, are they? It's not stand-up comic joke thing; it's a kind of observation of life: look, this is how it is, and if you just slip that down a bit ... it's something else again ... isn't it absurd, isn't life absurd? And I think it's hilariously funny, ... suddenly the carpet's pulled from underneath them, there's this big hole in the floor, ... it's that idea, metaphorically speaking ... that the outcome isn't what they thought, while we ... often have prior knowledge ... knowledge that they don't have, and we can laugh at their expense ... But there's also ... visual humour, ... like in the Tiger sketch, when Eric Idle looked down, there was this tiger's head which was kind of moving, which was just visually funny ... and then there's the verbal dexterity, there's all sorts of different things that are funny!"(L12,109)

b) (ii) the role of exaggeration

"It is the too much ... not the 'much', that is funny".<sup>20</sup>

We must first note that where exaggeration is used in any area such as 'sex' or 'violence' which may provoke latent anxiety in a subject, it is likely to reduce the effectiveness of the humour. This will preoccupy us more later, but we can already refer to two examples in which respondents did not appreciate exaggerative representation in Meaning of Life in what may have been sensitive areas. Thus one respondent referred to the sex-education sequence:

"... I think in the end that became funnier, I think almost when she came on the bed it became maybe too explicit, not the sex I meant too explicit, but the ..."(L5,97)

Another did not like the 'violence' of the war sequences, which were "overdone":

"... it's absolutely unnecessary"(H1,5)

In general, however, there was agreement about the effectiveness of exaggeration as a comedic device in Meaning of Life:

"... if anything, I think it usually enhances the joke"  
(L21,42)

and indeed a number of respondents (approvingly) spoke of the film itself as grossly exaggerative. L21's own

"most of the film was a gross exaggeration ..." (L21,43)

was echoed by a number of other comments, for example

"I think the fact that they, it goes over the top, somehow makes it less ... horrific ..." (H13,49)

"... everything is over the top, you know, the blood coming ... and it's a joke ... that's the way I take it ..."  
(L16,71)

There is a reference by a respondent who enjoyed the Mr. Creosote sequence to

"... the fact ... nobody could ever be that sick ..."  
(H7,18).<sup>21</sup>

It seems that the greater the exaggeration, the better.

Some respondents, however, were also concerned that excessive exaggeration may be counterproductive. The phrase "over the top" was sometimes used approvingly, but was also, to some, a cause for concern:

"... as long as it doesn't go completely over the top and kills the joke ..." (L21,42)

For a few respondents, the exaggeration of Mr. Creosote was too much, compared with the birth-sequence or the sex-education lesson.

"There's a small leap for my imagination, to make; not so much the number of kids, obviously, but ... in the sex-education one ... it's the next step, you know ... some of the jokes come from, whereas the exploding man, I don't know ..." (L17,29)

"... the bit that sticks in my mind is when they cut the baby's umbilical cord, and this is exaggeration, right, but

it was so ... quick, and sharp ... exaggerated, but it wasn't overexaggerated, it wasn't extended ... it was so quick you could almost have missed it, but it was an exaggeration and it worked ..."(L10,29)

For another viewer, drag impersonations of Northern working-class women were not objectionable, because

"... it's not over the top ... the way that say, Les Dawson is, or even Benny Hill ..."(L12,99)

Yet this can in turn be contrasted with another instance where a respondent considers the possibility that over-the-top ('foregrounded') 'sexist' representations may themselves work against sexism:

"It's a bit tricky, really, ... all through the Monty Python you always had, the old ones with Carol Cleveland, she's always like the busty sort of secretary, but she's so over the top, it's almost taking the mickey of people who ... do the sexist things ... it's sort of borderline ..."(H5,13)

The evaluation of exaggeration, then, can be tied to questions of performance, timing, and perceived ideological 'correctness',<sup>22</sup> as much as to notions of plausibility.

On the whole the respondents were disinclined to pursue the question of understatement in relation to exaggeration. In view of the potential of this line of enquiry in a psychoanalytic domain (cf. pp.153-154 above) this was a disappointment. An analysis of the (English?) predilection for mixing understatement and exaggeration, evoked by

"... these wonderful little memories of men exploding and so forth ..."(H13,58)

will have to await another day.



b) (iii) laughter of superiority

There were relatively few allusions to this comedic mode, only 3 or 4 in all. Thus

"... we often have prior knowledge, we have knowledge that they don't have, we can laugh at their expense ..."  
(L12,109)

Slapstick was evoked only once, during a discussion of the 'cleaning-woman's punishment:

"... there's a lot of pleasure to be derived just from seeing someone having, not necessarily a bucket of vomit, but a ... bucket of any, paint or anything, emptied all over them ... any simple slapstick style of comedy ..."(L13,77)

A single, slightly more revealing, instance of superior laughter emerged in the same piece of discussion:

"... I can't help laughing in that scene because she is, ... cleaning the floor and suddenly she is talking, she was at the Prado and the British Museum and the Academie Française and ... the waiter has got fed up ... and he put all this ... that's why I laugh, because ... she's just doing some cheap philosophy ..."(L16,77)

The other reference to superiority occurred when one group was talking about the 'cleverness' of the Monty Python team, and speculating about the chase sequence near the end of the film in which a man is pursued by a group of topless women:

"... you don't know, you see ... is it just clever-clever, two fingers up at you, mate, we're going to put these women in anyway ... or not ..."(L5,98).

This group (and L5 in particular) was the only one which raised the possibility of a cynically 'superior' component in the Monty Python mode of mockery.

b) (iv) making fun/mickey-taking

This subsection and the next are considered separately insofar that at various points during the interviews the 'social criticism' of Meaning of Life was perceived as more or less playful. In the next subsection we shall look at those comments which identified Meaning of Life as a serious attack on the Establishment, but first let us deal with 'ridicule' and 'mickey-taking', which imply a more playful position.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly the ludic appropriation of film conventions/genres (for example the swashbuckling-musical in the Crimson Assurance section) would be 'playful' rather than 'serious'; though even here the conventions act as supports for quite deep cultural expectations. One respondent, both of whose parent worked in theatre, was particularly interested in the Sperm song:

"... again, in the 'Every Sperm is Sacred', I'm thinking of Oliver and I'm thinking of the musical genre, laughing at the sending-up of that ... That's predominantly why I found it funny; the fact that they're singing (it) ..." L22,85)

This was followed by

"Any poking at religion is always good for a laugh with me!" (L23,85)

As we shall see later, many of the questionnaire returns indicated that 'irreverence' was a highly appreciated aspect of Monty Python humour. This was supported by

"... the first sketch, ... in the hospital, I really liked that one, I thought it was very good; that had all the good ingredients, sort of irreverence ... and just the way they ... ridiculed the system ..." (L6,84)

and by the large number of references to mickey-taking, poking fun,

etc. Indeed the slight shift from 'irreverence' to the more colloquial expressions now usually used seems to coincide with the democratisation of morality, with the secularisation which has continued to take place since the original Monty Python TV series. Authority (and particularly religious authority) is perhaps now less reverable anyway.

The mickey-taking was also identified by some respondents in relation to a number of other 'objects'. One respondent described how the topless-women-chasing-man sequence worked for her:

"... if they hadn't said that bit about what he's been sentenced for; if he's been sentenced for robbing a bank or something, then perhaps I would have thought, oh ... Benny Hill again, sort of sexist stuff, but because they put that in, he's been sentenced for gratuitous ... I didn't mind that there were loads of naked women running across ... 'cos then it was taking the mickey out of ... sexist things ..."  
(H5,13)

For this respondent the drag representations of women were also mitigated by the treatment of 'male' characters, for instance in the 'Protestant' scene, when Eric Idle as Mrs. Blackitt

"... makes him out to be a real twit ... taking the mickey out of a bloke that could be like that ..." (H5,14)

Both the subjects in this interview (H5 and H7) agreed that a more complex 'play' with sexual stereotyping tended to make the images more acceptable/funny.

A number of respondents identified social institutions and behaviours which the Monty Python team must have been ideally equipped to mock. School and church surfaced several times (e.g. L12,94). The salmon mousse in the 'Grim Reaper' sequence drew one respondent's attention to

"... it's the politeness thing, ... taking the mickey out of everyone being so polite ..." (H5,9)

Though there was one reference to

"... they're also taking the mickey out of the working-class man, ..." (L12,99)

far more numerous were comments about ridiculing institutions associated with the upper/middle classes, with the Establishment.

Thus

"... the main thrust of their humour always seemed to be anti-establishment, ... always picking on the army and public-school headmasters, figures of the Establishment ..." (L12,99)

"... they're always ridiculing the upper classes and yet they, they come from that sort of well-educated system and they're ridiculing it ..." (L6,90)

Yet, as the same respondent goes on to say, the credibility of the mockery/attack may be undermined by the fact that the Python team could not really be seen to break completely with the very values they ridiculed.

"... even in ridiculing it they seem to adopt the same sort of ... sexual attitudes ... that the system represents, like what we see in Personal Services ... we all know about, ... sort of judges in drag all the time, ... they're just still in a way continuing that because ... they just found another outlet, they can do it on telly instead; ... they're trying to ridicule it as well, but they're reinforcing it as well ..." (L6,90)

This rejoins the comment of L5 about "clever Cambridge boys" having fun, and is echoed by

"... they're always in an advantageous position, because they would say 'oh we're debunking all this' ... and 'taking the piss out of philosophy, we're taking the piss out of university'; ... they've been there, they've done university ..." (L5,107)

Let us not assume, though, that it is impossible for individuals to be critical of a system which feeds them well.

"... it's a question of intent, ... are they exposing it, or are they just poking fun at it, or what ..." (L12,116)

Whether the question of intent is as important as that of how the comedy is decoded, read, received, is another matter; L12's distinction nevertheless usefully takes us into the next set of responses.

b) (v) attack

One particular respondent, L21, repeatedly gave "attacking conventions" as a principal reason for liking Monty Python. For him, identifying and enjoying such "attacks" seemed to be something of a preoccupation, the phrase "attack on society" recurring a number of times. In a discussion of sitcom, for example,

"... Dear John I suppose you could include under 'attack on society' ..." (L21,40)

The tendency to categorise is consistent with this subject's strong interest in/collection of horror-film ephemera.

Nevertheless, several other respondents also noted that Meaning of Life seemed less playful, more serious than previous Monty Python material. For two viewers, the remarks of one of the terrible casualties of the 'Zulu War' episode were quite startling. The remarks were

"Better than staying at home, eh sir! At home if you kill someone they arrest you. Here they give you a gun, and show you what to do, sir. I mean, I killed fifteen of those buggers sir! Now at home they'd hang me. Here they give me a fucking medal sir!"

With two respondents this prompted an exchange wherein the episode was seen as "still funny ..." but as quite a startling departure from the usual mickey-taking:

"...that was more like a real...statement against..." (H5,11)

For another respondent, Meaning of Life

"is a statement about the human condition in a way the other films aren't ..."(L13,65)

For another,

"... it's definitely one of their, it's actually almost a serious film, for them ... they weren't just trying to be funny ... I don't think they were trying to be ... literally hysterical; I think they were trying to be a bit more ... contemplating things ..."(L6,80)

With a little prompting, another subject agreed that the film was

"... quite scathing, ... and also it's ... quite angry ..."  
(L10,33)

It was clear that for a number of respondents the term 'satire' would have been appropriate:

"... it's closer to satire ... the closest to satire they've been ..."(H13,52)

"... if you sort of go back to the school sketch, ... the way I saw it ... is that they were saying ... here you have a school lesson to talk, supposed to talk about sex education and they don't actually talk about sex; I think it was trying to make a point ... how ludicrous sex education is and how ludicrous this British-sort-of-ness of pompous Brits, as Death said later on ... British people are just so afraid of sex, and it is so taboo, ... I always think that's quite a serious sketch, because it's saying that ... we can't even educate our own children in sexuality ..."(L6,87-88)

As we have already seen, the sub-text of class was sometimes made explicit, sometimes in the context of an appraisal of Meaning of Life as more 'serious':

"... seeing it this time there wasn't really that much I would say was exceptionally funny ... possibly ... the fat man at the table, basically because it's an attack on the posh people ... the way that they isolate themselves ..."  
(L21,36)

The comments on Establishment-directed satire were mixed, however, with several others identifying a more indiscriminate, scatter-gun

strategy. Thus in two separate discussions about the arguable sexism of the representation of women in Meaning of Life:

"... I wouldn't actually call them sexist, they actually poke fun at a hell of a lot of things in society, so you can't just isolate that ..."(L12,101)

and

"It attacks everything, it doesn't say, right, we're going to attack women in this film ..."(L21,46)

There was also a (disconcerting) ambivalence about whether the 'attacks', however biting, were 'sincere'. This was typified by the comments of one respondent who enjoyed the tendentious humour, but seemed determined to 'excuse' it:

"... like the moment where they are, you know the Catholic church and the Protestants, the first time I didn't know if I have to laugh or not, and knowing the film now, I think it's extremely funny ... because even if it ... could be upsetting for some people, but for me, I know they don't mean it, really ..."(L16,64) (cf. also L16,70)

The question of whether a film such as Meaning of Life actively engages with issues such as sexism or exploits them was well put by one respondent:

"... are they saying well this is the position of women in society, you know there are a lot of working-class women who are like this who are shat upon, ... or are they actually joining the bandwagon, I mean that's what's a bit difficult ... it is a question of how much you trust them in terms of the other social comment that comes from the other sketches ..."(L12,101)

As we suggested above, this may in fact be less important than how particular spectators decode the film. This ushers in the inevitable category of the unconscious.

b) (vi) 'uncomfortable' material, release and inhibition

At this point we can begin to address the psychoanalytic functions of some kinds of comedicity. Under what circumstances can an affective investment in a potentially painful/threatening area inhibit enjoyment of humour dealing with that subject area, and when can such humour be enjoyed despite (or because of) the affective investment? The tendentious subject-areas which most interest us will be considered in a later subsection, but first let us look at some other remarks.

One pair of respondents referred to their working situation (a day centre for the handicapped) as an example of the need for humour as a 'survival strategy':

"... if you sat and thought about all those people in there and their disabilities and handicaps, and ... didn't find any of them funny, you'd probably be a nervous wreck yourself ... you'd be so overwhelmed by thinking, Christ, you know it's really sad ... or it's really unfortunate etc. ... if you couldn't find things funny and laugh, you know, laugh things off ... and make jokes, you know after hours or whatever ... that relief isn't there, you need that relief ..."(H5)

"It's using humour as a kind of barrier, ... to bounce off all your sort of distress or whatever ..."(H7)

"... a release ... you don't really think about it as that way ... but it is an automatic relief, ..."(H5)

"... I sort of look for things that are funny, as well at times ... perhaps 'unfortunate' situations, ... maybe it is for that reason, though ... so I don't hurt myself ..."(H7)  
(15-16)

This pair also readily agreed that Meaning of Life contained a number of elements which could cause offence or upset some people: they noted the use of children in the 'Sperm Song' sequence and



possible parents' objections to this, and the use of model babies in this and the preceding sequence.

The predisposition to use humour in this kind of way may tally to some extent with an appreciation of Monty Python. Thus our youngest respondent, in relation to the Organ Transplant scene, said:

"... a Monty Python (fan), even if they're repulsed by imagery like that, in other films, will probably appreciate it, because they know what to expect from Monty Python material, but for ... a majority of the audience, and for someone who doesn't appreciate Monty Python to such an extent ... they would actually have shut themselves off from the scene ..."  
(L21,38)

Appreciation of the Live Organ Transplants scene would therefore depend largely on familiarity, on knowing what to expect, and on removing real anxieties about bodily mutilation to a safe distance (cf. also H11,53).

The effect of closeness to real illness, death etc. on their appreciation of the blacker humour in Meaning of Life was commented on by a number of respondents:

"... it's important, how close the events are together ... I think having it ... on top of, ... literally within days is ... just ... not be on ... but certainly once the ... immediate pain was over, you know whether it was a death or whatever, I think yes, it could be that, it would take the sort of tightness out of the situation ..."(H11.52)

The degree of present involvement is clearly crucial. Speaking of the masters v boys rugby match in the film, the same respondent recalled that

"... my oldest son got beaten up, a couple of weeks back, ... quite badly beaten up ... but, fine, yes I was very upset at the time, but looking at that, and there was a small little part in that, where there's a couple of blokes, I think one had hold of this lad's arm, the other one putting the boot in, and I thought that was, that was very funny, ... you

probably wouldn't notice it, because it was over very quickly 'cos it was while the camera was following something else, ..." (H11,63)

Another respondent, L17, wondered if her enjoyment of the 'Grim Reaper' sequence may have been affected by her father's cancer, but felt not. Another, speaking of the 'Derek and Clive' tapes (cf. footnote 193 above), remembered that

"... they do a hell of a lot of sketches about cancer, and they really are quite horrific about it, ... I found it hysterically funny, and then my nan died of cancer, ... I still found it funny, but it had a sore note, ... and nowadays if I listen to them, ... I can still find it funny but ... it's got a dead note about it ... (laughter) ... you know, because it's obviously got quite close to my heart ... I can remember just rolling about on the floor and it was so funny the way they were singing these songs about cancer ... because it struck home with me, with the death of my nan ... after that I can't really look at it in the same light, ... it's still funny, but it's not ... and I feel a bit guilty thinking that I was ... laughing so much about it" (H5,17-18)

A similar, though more tortuous, observation was made by the respondent who had also so carefully distanced himself from the 'typical Monty Python fan'.

"... if you're ... experiencing a death in the family, certain things relating to death I'd think wouldn't be perceived as so funny ... I've actually got a grandparent who's ... not got long to live ... but I've also had one who's died recently, and there was that bit at the beginning of Monty Python, where they had the funeral procession; I didn't find that particularly funny; possibly in a more sort of relaxed way towards death that may have been perceived as more funny. But that's just generalising the idea ... giving an example. I wouldn't say that I'm actually responding that way; I didn't actually respond that way ... I'm just citing an example of how someone may actually be in a position while viewing that material ..." (L21,41)

Though he did also give other reasons for his relative lack of appreciation, this subject's somewhat odd use of pronouns and moods ("I didn't find that particularly funny ... possibly in a more ...

relaxed way towards death, that may have been perceived as funny") was striking. At one point he pinpointed his insecurity:

"... in the past I don't think I've ever experienced that, I'm more sort of repulsed by the imagery ... I feel it could be my insecurity or ... but I feel it's more attacking me, rather than attacking society or whatever ..." (L21,42)

The same respondent also noted the 'release' function which humour can fulfil for writers/performers, which amounts to the same thing as the 'survival strategy' of which H5 and H7 spoke (cf. pg.308 above):

"... writing the material could be a release for something that he's experienced ... a sort of emotional release ... coming to terms with reality and actually ... making fun of something they've been depressed by ..." (L21,42)

For each of us that sees a film writes that film within her/his own head.

#### c) Comedic and other Pleasures

We have been obliged to note at various points above (especially pp.74-80 ff.) that pleasure can scarcely be confined to the comedic, and that the key terms with which such pleasures can be apprehended seem to be repetition, recognition, novelty.<sup>24</sup> These key concepts will perforce resurface throughout this section, and we shall shortly be looking at how they were explicitly addressed by our respondents. First, however, let us consider some of the pleasures (some, such as performance, closely linked to the comedic, others less so) which were discussed along the way.

#### c) (i) general comments on comedic/non-comedic pleasures

The first comment of one respondent about Meaning of Life was

"I found it very, extremely funny, ... even if you don't laugh at something, it ... makes me, ... I really like it ..."(L16,64)

In the shift from 'funniness' to 'liking' the relevance of the laughter response is thrown into doubt. Another respondent commented that it was

"... a shame just to judge it ... on its 'laugh-factor' ..."  
(H13,48)

Yet another, as well as feeling that much television comedy was not funny, was interested in

"... the difference between 'is this funny?' and 'is this amusing, or entertaining' ..."(L10,32)

The same respondent, referring to the HAT sheets, noted that there was

"... a lot that I didn't find funny; I found it absorbing, and I found it quite interesting ..."(L10,23)

with the result that, like some other respondents, this one found himself scoring a lot of "moderately funny"s on the HAT sheet. This was echoed, albeit hesitantly, in another interview:

"... I didn't find it that funny but I did enjoy it; ... when I say funny I mean that I laughed at it; and when I saw something spontaneous, it caused me to laugh, whereas just because you didn't laugh doesn't mean that you didn't enjoy it, ... I think I did enjoy watching it ..."(L6,81)

For another subject, L17, the only unambiguously enjoyable sequence in the film was the Sperm Song.

This reassuring pluralisation has, however, to be set against the statements of one or two subjects for whom the only pleasures of the film were, in fact, comedic. Thus

"... I'd say the opposite, I didn't enjoy the film, but bits of it were funny ... sort of a reverse thing ..."(L23,81)

The majority of the respondents, nevertheless, indicated that they recognised in their responses to Monty Python both comedic and other pleasures. Some of these other pleasures are also obviously intimately connected to the comedic, yet we shall consider them separately here since they were usually discussed in the interviews outside a strictly comedic context.

c) (ii) performance

The pleasure of performance is clearly difficult to distinguish from that of a 'simpler' recognition of a favourite actor or comedian.<sup>25</sup>

Performance is generally thought of in relation to the creation or presentation of character; it is perhaps the expressive element at the heart of acting as mise-en-scene.

"Performance is what the performer does in addition to the actions/functions she or he performs in the plot and the lines she or he is given to say. Performance is how the action/function is done, how the lines are said."<sup>26</sup>

Performance elements can then be seen as the voice, gesture, body posture and body movement. The problem is that the 'meaning' attached to these elements is likely to vary according to the historical/cultural conjuncture:

"The signification of a given performance sign is determined by its place within culturally and historically specific codes."<sup>27</sup>

This means that any attempt to establish a 'vocabulary' of performance signs is bound to be fraught with difficulty, the more so since

"... the signification of a performance sign is determined by the multiple codes in relation to which it is situated, and

also by its place in the totality of the film."<sup>28</sup>

The piece by Dyer cited here deals with the more 'classical' film acting/performance styles/elements. To take on something like the performance signs of surrealist comedy would indeed be a major undertaking!

Nevertheless, it proved easy to evince from most respondents a recall of pleasurable moments during Meaning of Life in which individual performance played at least a major role.

One group was at first slow to pick up the notion of performance, but began warming to the idea with

"... they're good actors, basically, and ... any of the sketches that fall, ... flat, relatively speaking, I think the acting in it, and the performance, is still very good ..."(H11,51)

In general, however, this was a good area to raise early in an interview. Interestingly, the performance-skills of Terry Jones and Graham Chapman were rarely concentrated on, nor indeed (less interestingly in view of his only sporadic screen appearances) were those of Terry Gilliam.

John Cleese ('John Cleese'?) was mentioned most frequently in this context. For example, one respondent was not particularly amused by the overt crudity of "couldn't you have your balls cut off?", yet found the "vaginal juices" sketch funny

"because it was John Cleese ..."(H5,10)

For another,

"it was more particularly the actors' expressions"(L13,68)

A third respondent was

"... not sure where one thing ends and one thing begins, with humour; ... it's also the way John Cleese parodies the schoolteacher which is brilliant ..."

Yet another made a number of remarks about John Cleese. He

"... noticed that wherever there was something with John Cleese I enjoyed it much more ..." (L10,23)

and indeed at one point accidentally referred to Fawlty Towers when he meant to say 'Monty Python'. (L10,31)

Eric Idle also received a number of mentions.

"Eric Idle's ... Noel Coward face just tickled me anyway ..." (H5,10)

"Eric Idle is the ... the sketch about the Grim Reaper, as the hostess, was excellent ... (H13,51)

For the same respondent,

"... Eric Idle again is very good as this ... sort of woman ..." (H13,55)

A more distanced opinion was that

"Eric Idle I don't think was that good in this one, we didn't see that much of him; Michael Palin I thought was good, his facial expressions and his, just complete over-acting. I think John Cleese, there's a touch of seriousness sometimes about his acting which tends to destroy the ... zany bit ..." (L21,36)

Michael Palin's performance was praised less often, though

"... take the scene where they're doing the marching in the square, it's Michael Palin's facial expressions, ... and the way that he just bellows ... that actually I think makes that scene ... there's nothing else but Michael Palin in that scene ..." (L21,36)

The respondent who found him attractive said that

"... I quite enjoy watching him ... there's a kind of pleasure, oh here they are, here's the lads! ... there's a sort of pally feeling I get ..." (L12,106)

This last remark alerts us to the way in which recognition and anticipation overlap with the enjoyment of performance as such. The same respondent recognized that

"... at points I was thinking, am I laughing because this is funny, or am I laughing because it reminds me of ... I mean, John Cleese as a waiter, or in fact in the trenches ... it was just like that waiter sketch, where he comes in with the meat cleaver and says 'How dare you be rude about our food?', ... because they so easily go into kind of parodies of characters they've done before, what you tend to do is recognize that, that you laughed at before ..." (L12,94)

c) (iii) parody

Parody was spontaneously offered by many respondents as an important element in their enjoyment (or otherwise) of Meaning of Life. For a minority the parody did not work when it was 'exaggerated':

"I felt it was such a simple make-up in just overdoing it ... there was shot the first one and then the second and then you knew how it would end, so that for me, it spoiled ..." (H1,5)

The relative unsubtlety of the Live Organ Transplant sequence had a similar effect for another respondent:

"... it is just evocative enough to, to make you slightly queasy ... it's not so kind of parodic ..." (L13,71).<sup>29</sup>

H1 did, however, appreciate the gentler parody of the Crimson Permanent Assurance section, as did a number of others. One saw the references to

"Erroll Flynn and to Ben Hur (L16,68)

while another

"laughed at the send-up of "Burt Lancaster ... swashbuckling and all that"" (L22,81)



Another respondent referred to

"... the Emerald City ... Wizard of Oz, ... the City of London, the City, financial city, yes ..." (L5,96)

but then, in contrast to the above respondent (L22), went on:

"... and I'm quite enjoying myself, trying to spot the cliché, and say where it came from, and how witty they were being, but ... I wasn't really laughing ..." (L5,96)

It seems that the same (or similar) perceived content - the playful use of generic clichés - has here been described as comedic on the one hand ("found it funny") while on the other hand it has reportedly provided some other, non-comedic, enjoyment.

Parody can, then, be seen as potentially, but not necessarily, comedic. There is a clear degree of overlap with the 'making fun'/'mickey-taking' discussed under the comedic rubric above (pp.302-305), and the line between the two is difficult to draw. It is interesting to note that the respondent who referred to the Assurance section as "funny" (L22) is the same one who described the send-up of the musical in the Sperm Song as funny.

Another section which several respondents picked up as parodic was, indeed, the Sperm Song. The respondent for whom this was the only really enjoyable part of the film particularly enjoyed the outdoor sequence and its sending-up of musical choreography. For L16 it was "like from Oliver" (L16,67) and we have already noted (pp.302-305 above) how L22 laughed at the sending-up of Oliver and of the musical genre. Interestingly, another respondent also felt that it was

"... quite funny, that 'Every Sperm is Precious', but it was just the parody was very clever as well, it was like Oliver ..." (L12,94)

and indeed the "but" here indicates that for her the parody here was perhaps not of itself funny.

Several respondents also remarked on Eric Idle's parody of Noel Coward in the 'Penis Song'. Elsewhere, the childbirth scene was compared with documentary film about "childbirth in Germany"(L10,24) and was described as "absolute parody"(L10,25). The same respondent also affirmed that for him parody certainly could be funny: in relation to John Cleese,

"... I was laughing at him and I was laughing at the parody ... of waiters ... I found myself doing that quite a lot ... I was laughing at what it was getting at but not actually it ..."(L10,24)

Self-parody is perhaps more likely to be perceived as funny.

"... they seem to be very aware of the mould they were pushed into, in terms of public school and Cambridge, and what sort of people society expects to come out of that, and they've actually turned it on its head, and that's really why I suppose a lot of us find it funny ..."(L12,100)

Yet comedic or not, parody and imitation were certainly identified by most respondents as central strands of Monty Python humour.

But then again,

"Monty Python was always like that really ... you'd have parodies ..."(L13,68)

The parody was something to be anticipated.

c) (iv) anticipation

Anticipation of comedic pleasure was acknowledged as a factor in their enjoyment by a number of respondents.

"... probably it's also because I know that it is a Monty Python film, coming on ..." (H1,3)

"... I think actually just seeing them sort of brings on a bit of a laugh, because you're almost anticipating before .../..." (H11,50)

"I think you ... get to know the repertoire ..." (L12,112)

"... so first to see them makes me laugh already ..." (L16,65)

One or two respondents noted the specific anticipation of Mr. Creosote; thus

"... when that come on I did remember a lot of it ... as with other bits, but more so with that particular thing, I was actually laughing before things ... come up ..." (H7,9)

It is interesting, however, that for others the anticipation of Mr. Creosote was unpleasurable; for example

"... I dreaded that bit ... because I remember when I first saw it in the cinema, I remember the whole cinema going (vomit sound) ..." (L14,93) (cf. also L17,24)

For one respondent the experience was not unpleasurable, but fore-knowledge did reduce enjoyment:

"... you can only laugh like that when you see it the first time; the second time you know what's happening, so it's not so funny ..." (L6,80)

In one case there was a fairly emphatic denial of the pleasure of comedic anticipation:

"... usually when you watch a comedy film for a second time, (I'm) aware what's happening, it's not as funny ... Life of Brian would probably be an exception, Time Bandits probably another exception ... but, it's because you're expecting the joke and as you're aware of the ending to it, and the way it's presented, it's not as funny ..." (L21,35)

There was one respondent who caught quite well the ambiguity of whether anticipation is pleasurable or not.

"... you can also be disappointed when you know something's going to happen .../... but even though you know something's

going to happen to that fat man, ... every time he pukes into the bucket, you still laugh, ..." (H13,50)

c) (v) novelty

If we have identified some uncertainty about whether or not anticipation/recollection of what was once funny/amusing itself triggers amusement, the respondents were clearer about the importance of novelty as a factor in the funniness on Monty Python, most particularly in the original TV series.

In response to L10's comment about this (L10,30), examples were suggested of

"... I don't remember seeing animation like that before ... and the opening as well, which is why my father didn't like to watch it, ... the nude man playing the piano, you didn't tend to get that on the BBC ..." (L17,30-31)

Another respondent remembered being "fascinated" by the "difference" of Monty Python (H5,20). Yet another was

"... enthralled, I thought what the hell is this programme? ... it was like being hit in the face with something, ... very exciting ..." (L12,106)

Some respondents also recognized the way in which one particular kind of novelty tends to have a limited life.

"... the first two series seemed to have a lot of original funny stuff in, then I found you'd get one or two good jokes, and very thinly spread ... there seemed to be a clear difference in my mind between the first and second series, where it all seemed very new, and then it just seemed to be, they had the same characters each time, and you're expected to find funny them doing the same thing ... seemed to latch onto a catch-phrase each programme, and spend ... quarter of an hour working through that, it just didn't seem to have the appeal of the earlier work ..." (L23,94)

We shall be looking at the shock/novelty value of smut later;  
for the moment let us remember John Cleese's own admission that

"stuff with an element of shock does have the ability to make an audience laugh much more than stuff without it, and therefore when you're a little bit short of material it's awfully easy to start flailing around ..."<sup>30</sup>

Thus in speaking of Mr. Creosote, one respondent remarked that

"... it's a bit crude, but the way that he's being sick ... you don't usually see that in a film, it's original ..."  
(L21,36)

c) (vi) rule-breaking

Clearly the rule-breaking of the Python team may be seen as the self-indulgent play of a privileged 'elite' - a view favoured by respondents L5 and L6 in particular (pg.294 above) - or it could, with its play on subject-positions and on unitary/multiple diegesis, be seen as profoundly progressive. As we have already noted,

"it would obviously be far too simplistic to see the Monty Python films either as revolutionary surrealism or as devious reactionary opium." (pg.105 above)

Oddly, it is the respondents who were critical of the Python's 'elitist' position who also most clearly identified the group's radical potential. For L6, rule-breaking novelty could certainly be radical:

"... Jools Holland makes his 'groovy fucker' cock-up ... on kids' television; I mean, you find that funny, and also in a way radical because like you're breaking the mould by saying it ..."(L6,87)

He clarified elsewhere that surprise and expectation are important factors in this area. The other Monty Python 'critic' recognized that "it was quite a naughty thing to watch"(L5,94,112). Asked what kinds of people would be Python fans, another respondent thought

they would be "possibly rebellious against society"(L21,39). This is the kind of proposition which it would be extremely difficult to test, but there did appear to be some evidence that (some of) those respondents who would probably see themselves as politically oppositional originally saw the rule-breaking of Monty Python as invigorating and positive. There was also a specificity in the responses with regard to the age of the respondents when they first saw the TV series, and indeed to the broadcasting 'climate' of the time.

c) (vii) enjoying the 'clever'

While Monty Python humour was occasionally described in the discussions as 'clever' in order to detract from its radical potential, the term was more frequently employed to identify a non-comedic source of pleasure. For one respondent, referring to the Crimson Permanent Assurance section, there were

"... some clever things in that, but not ... things that would actually make you laugh out loud ... every time I've seen that, I've found that better ... because when I first saw it, I remember thinking, 'this is a bit ... naff' but every time I've seen it, it's got better; ... but I enjoyed that, it was good ... clever things in there ... funny-clever ..." (H7,11)

This was echoed by a number of other respondents.

"... I find it's ... clever rather than amusing ..." (H11,48)

"... ingenious but not necessarily funny ..." (L22,84)

"... there's a moment ... where a guy walks on in a Zulu suit, unzips it and it is in fact an immaculate white guy in a suit, and then speaks with a, an African accent; which I didn't think was funny, ... it even crossed by mind ... that maybe I shouldn't be laughing at it ... but I found it quite ... again, ingenious, clever. But not necessarily funny ..." (L22,89)

In relation to the Mr. Creosote sequence, another respondent enthused:

"... such great ideas, absolutely fantastic ... the gag in itself is not funny at all ..." (L16,69)

The same respondent spoke of the (repeated) TV series:

"... it was clever, I could see ... what they were saying, but I didn't laugh at all ..." (L16,69)

Laughter and appreciation of cleverness were not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. One person referred to

"... the cleverness of the songs, ... even though they're comic songs, you can appreciate that they're clever, the way their words were put together ... and that made you laugh in ... a different sort of a way, ... that was really clever, like the Sperm Song and that, it made you laugh because you thought how clever the words were as well" (H5,12)

There was an interesting correlation between some of the comments on ingenuity/cleverness and the biographical background of the respondents. Thus two particular comments were made about Gilliam's contribution.

"The animation at the very beginning I thought was good, yes, there's some good bits in there ... that was clever ... some good symbolic things ..." (H7,11)

came from someone who spends much of his spare time drawing and painting.

"... they seem to have ... not put much of old Gilliam's animations in ... but, ... this pirate-ship-cum-office building, and I suppose quite an original way of ... of using things ... I mean you go through thinking yes, yes that's very very clever ... that's quite ingenious ... (Q: "that's what you're enjoying") ... yes, yes ..." (H13,50)

was from an art teacher. There may thus be interpretive communities which share an appreciation of the same kinds of cleverness. The more explicit intellectual kind of cleverness would thus require a higher degree of cultural capital:

"... there is a lot of subtlety there, but it's quite intellectual, ... and you've got to know about ..." (L12,107)

At the same time, a lack of overfamiliarity can increase appreciation of cleverness; for one respondent, the fact that English is not her first language had the following effect:

"... I especially enjoyed if I understood all ... the verbal puns and jokes ... probably this for a native speaker wouldn't be of so much importance of delight ..." (H1,4)

The most extensively cited section with regard to 'cleverness' was probably the Crimson Permanent Assurance section, though one reason for this was no doubt the fact that this section (partly by virtue of being first!) was difficult to rate on the HAT response sheet. Thus one respondent

"... put a '1' for the first one, but I found it clever, but I didn't find it ... funny ..." (L17,23) (cf. also L10,23 and L5,96)

In another case,

"... I didn't find that at all funny ... really debating whether to ring, 'this is not funny at all' or the next bit .../... I couldn't recognize it, really, as kind of Monty Python ... what I enjoyed was then the reference back to it further on ... rather cleverly done" (L12,96)

The best example with which to end may be one which brings us back to the possibility of a laughter not associated with funniness.

"It's very ... ingenious, but you know the ideas were very ingenious, that they used the mundane office equipment and made it look like weapons of slavery or piratical weapons but ... it didn't make it extremely funny, you sort of laughed at it ... ingenuity ..." (L6,81)

#### c) (viii) visual pleasure<sup>31</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that there were relatively few explicit references to visual pleasures, to the pleasures of looking/seeing. One respondent contrasted visual humour with joking humour (cf. pg.295 above):



"... in a comedy film I wouldn't say so much a joke, it's more visual, in a film ..." (L21,36)

though he also felt that in the 'Fighting Each Other' section,

"... the presenting of the clocks, the visual joke, was also funny ..." (L21,37)

For our art teacher

"... there's some quite nice visual ... I wouldn't go so far as to say visual delights, but ... it's not an unattractive film" (H13,48)

One comparison was made with an earlier Monty Python film:

"... if I compare with The Holy Grail, I found less pleasurable to watch as a movie ... in Holy Grail I remember the moments which are really pleasurable ... they were beautiful, ... a kind of poetry ..." (L16,67)

though the same respondent did go on to describe the Crimson Permanent Assurance section as very pleasurable, as poetic (68). The point of Gilliam's direction was picked up on another occasion:

"... he's a very sort of powerful film director, he makes things very watchable, ... I think that film's sort of built on the television series, almost in some ways surpass them because of that visual filmic skill that comes through ..." (L6,81)

There were two other isolated references to visual humour.

"... some of the things they do, almost as slapstick, it's very funny to see a major wearing ladies' underwear ..." (L5,117)

"... there's visual humour, ... like when in the Tiger sketch, when Eric Idle looked down, there was this tiger's head which was kind of moving, ... just visually funny!" (L12,109)

c) (ix) production values, timing, writing

Some instances of remarks about these elements are considered separately here insofar that the remarks were made independently of

the categories already dealt with, under which they may otherwise have been subsumed.

There was some praise for the production values of the film.

"The actual sets and everything, it's not sort of cardboard quick flash-in-the-pan sort of sketches, they're well structured, or well rehearsed ... there's a lot of work gone into it ..."(H7,12)

Another respondent enjoyed the outdoor part of the Sperm Song, feeling that it was well choreographed (L17,28). For another, the film had

"... higher production values than most of the others, ... TV Monty Python, or the earlier, first films, ... the pirate thing at the beginning seemed to have all the ... afford to kind of create that effect, the ... noisy sweep ..."  
(L13,67)

though this respondent was not sure if this necessarily worked to the film's advantage.

Only one direct comment was made about appreciating 'verbal dexterity' (L12,109). Oddly, all the remarks made explicitly about the script or the timing came from one respondent, and were, on the whole, critical (though he did enjoy the film). Thus in the Sperm Song, for example

"... (the kids) should be very much in character in that sketch, you know they should be talking Yorkshire ... somehow it starts to crumble, but it's a very good idea ..."  
(H13,55)

The relative ineffectiveness of lines such as "Couldn't mummy have worn some sort of pessary?" in this sequence was explained thus:

"Perhaps it should have been said by a younger kid, ... I think the timing's wrong, the delivery's, somehow is cocked up, I suppose it could be funny, yes ... I think that's a technical point ..."(H13,54)

There was criticism of a 'joke' in the Protestant sketch:

"... and then they really spoil the joke, by ... the one about, ... hundreds of kids, every time you have sexual intercourse you(?) ... and all they need to say is 'we've got two', ... you could leave it there, you don't have to go, 'and we've had sexual intercourse twice!' ... it's spoiled!"(H13,55)

The same respondent also speculated about how the idea of driving the cars to heaven in the last section came to be in the script:

"... I think, when they were conceiving a particular idea, ... they sort of ... the special effects and said right, let's do the cars as well ... you reinforce, and make the joke, that bit funnier ... but there's other occasions when they ... don't ... take their ideas forward ... which is a shame ..."(H13,61)

c) (x) narrative and structure

One respondent pinpointed an important area of pleasure.

"... it's also to do with expectation of the narrative, isn't it ..."(L12,112)

and it is striking that comments in relation to this tended to polarize between those expressing appreciation of the disconnectedness of Meaning of Life and those which were critical of it.

Some respondents liked the structure of the film. Thus

"... in terms of just pleasure, I had a greater conception of this as a movie ..."(L13,67)

Another respondent liked

"... the way that anything can happen, one minute you'll have one scene, the next minute something completely ... different or out of the ordinary ... also the way scenes continue on from each other, ..."(L21,35)

and noted the way in which narrative can work against the comedic; for him Meaning of Life

"... destroys the conventional narrative, which usually overkills the joke because in a film you're just ... plodding through the plot and are waiting for jokes to sort of appear ... at least in the Monty Python you can stop something

straight away and start again with a complete new idea without ... complaining that you've destroyed the narrative."(L21,43)

One respondent, to whom the film did not otherwise appeal,

"... liked the length of each item ... for me they weren't too long, but long enough to hold your interest ..."  
(L17,23)

She contrasted this favourably with And Now For Something Completely Different, which had been a disappointment:

"... some of it just seemed to have no structure at all, you just felt when they were writing it that you just didn't really know what they were getting at ..."(L17,31)

Many respondents, however, though they found other sources of enjoyment in the film, were critical of the structure of Meaning of Life. In some instances the criticism was of the internal pacing/structuring of the sketches;

"... sometimes things can seem to be a bit laboured ... try to drag everything out a bit, sometimes ..."(H7,11)

In another discussion two other respondents agreed that at one point in John Cleese's sex-education lesson

"... the joke had gone far enough ..."(L12)

"Yes, the joke was just ... it was a bit much; the funny thing was, I think the subtlety of ... the shy grammar-school boys .../... that was the funny bit, and his ... inability to communicate towards them ... so by the time the woman came on ..."(L5)

"... the point of the joke really was, yes ..."(L12) (97)

Some other adverse comments were of a more general nature. For one respondent there were "too many fillers"; he compared Meaning of Life with Life of Brian:

"... which I did enjoy, ... more cohesive, it made more sense as a story, as a plot ... this I found quite disappointing ... because some of the ideas it seemed to me could have been great ... but they didn't quite achieve ..."(L10,28)

In contrast to the above respondents for whom some sketches went on far too long, the solution for this respondent would have been to "develop things more", or "keep them going longer"(L10,28). Later, after extolling the virtues of Fawlty Towers, he went on:

"... my main criticism of this was that, ... something gets going, and it gets moving, and then it jumps, or it stops completely ..."(L10,31)

Another respondent felt that

"... they had all these wonderful ideas for sketches ... but they didn't know how to link them, so they kind of went into this ... Seven Ages of Man ... a kind of imposed structure, I wasn't terribly happy about ... but sometimes the sketch kind of went way off, and didn't actually stay on the 'age' theme ... I thought it was kind of imposed a bit, that structure, and ... I'm not sure it worked ..."(L12,108)

(this became part of the discussion with L5 (cf. pg.289 above) about how audiences would 'read' the artifice of the imposed structure)

There was at other points more complimentary discussion of the use of linking devices. L12 herself recognized the effectiveness(/novelty) of such devices in the original TV series:

"... what I think was very good about the series on television initially was that, ... when they'd made their point and they wanted to end the sketch, they'd go into a cartoon, ... or 16 tons, or someone saying 'This is a very silly sketch; and now for something completely different!' ... they actually linked them well ..."(L12,98) (cf. also H13,48)

Another respondent referred more explicitly to his pleasure:

"... within the film, what I found enjoyable and pleasurable but not funny was the beginning of one scene leading in from ... the end of another one ..."(L22,84)

The polarity of appreciation/non-appreciation of lack of structure was encapsulated in one brief exchange which was in fact about the Derek and Clive tapes:

"I've never found that as funny as Monty Python ... I've always found it a bit sort of gratuitous of swearing and all sorts of things ... some of it was humorous but overall I don't think it's quite ... as well structured, if you like, as Monty Python ... it's not scripted or anything anyway is it ... it's very loosely ..." (H7)

"... and yet that's something that made me ... I found funnier because ... it's just them sitting in the thing getting drunk ... spouting all these things ... really off the cuff sort of stuff ..." (H5) (19)

To some extent this appreciation or lack of appreciation can be related back to enjoyment of the new/unstructured as opposed to enjoyment of an (expected) structured narrative. More about unstructured absurdity below; first let us take a closer look at what our subjects said about the pleasures or repetition and recognition.

c) (xi) repetition

Of the sixteen respondents who were interviewed, ten had seen Meaning of Life before. Some reported that on this occasion their enjoyment was greater:

"... I think all the funny bits were those ones that I recognized again this time and made me laugh again .../... so I don't think any bits didn't work again ... if anything they worked more ..." (H5,9)

On the Crimson Permanent Assurance section, another commented:

"... when I first saw it, I remember thinking 'this is a bit ... naff', but every time I've seen it, it's got better ..." (H7,11)

For a third respondent, enjoyment was also greater:

"... I saw things I didn't see the first time or the second time, because ... I know for example the gag, I know the story, I know what's going to happen, so I'm watching more round the ..." (L16,68)

The respondent who had asserted that comedy tended to work less well on repeat viewing (pg.319 above) also felt that

"... usually comedy is not so artistic as other sorts of film, ... for me, watching a film more than once is for it's artistic quality ..." (L21,35)

One respondent reported a mixed reaction:

"... some of them certainly do sour when you've seen them a couple of times ..." (H11,48)

whereas with the Mr. Creosote section

"... every time I look at that, there's some little other bit that you can see ..." (H11,49)

Two other respondents were more sure of a decreased appreciation.

One simply stated the fact (L22,79), while the other

"... definitely thought it was funnier when I saw it the first time; the ... Mr. Creosote sketch really did crease me when I saw it at the cinema ..." (L6,80)

this latter from a respondent who tended not to see anticipation as enhancing enjoyment.

Finally, two respondents raised the issue of the context within which the (original) viewing had taken place. For one, the circumstances of the initial experience had been inhibiting:

"... I went with someone who really didn't like it and objected to it ... and I picked up on that ..." (L13,64)

In another case the appreciation of the 'liver donor' section in particular had been diminished:

"... I saw this on video directly after seeing Dawn of the Dead which might have an effect on my reactions towards that scene ... I watch a lot of horror films .../... it's different to the horror film I'd usually see ... it'll be serious, someone actually being murdered or something ... it's just the way that they come, these two medics come in with ease, it's just something natural to them ... the way that they're just taking the organs out, I suppose the first time I would have thought was funny ..." (L21,38)

c) (xii) recognition of 'the real'

A large number of approving comments were made about the 'realism' of various sequences in relation to the respondents' own experience. For one respondent the early sequence with the fish greeting each other in a fish tank was particularly amusing:

"... having worked in an office it really made me laugh even more, ... I used to sit and think that when I used to work in an office ... bored out of my skull I used to look at every one saying 'good morning' I used to imagine them with fish bodies ..." (H5,9)

Another respondent's comments in relation to the sex-education lesson, that

"... anything that's in a classroom is not interesting whatever it is, you know you turn off! ..." (H13,51)

"... they've taken the ultimate, which you'd think ... boys would be interested in, but in a classroom situation, you turn off ... whatever it is ..." (H13,54)

were clearly also related to his experience, as pupil and/or teacher. This was echoed by a comment about "beautifully observed classroom practice" (L12,97).

A number of elements were described as 'realistic'. For one person the childbirth sequences were particularly so (H5,17). The same respondent and her partner found Mr. Creosote's vomiting

"... incredibly realistic, I think everyone's ... they know what ... it's sort of like! sort of rings true ..." (H7,19)

"... there's a lot of realistic things in there, like the sick really looks like sick and the babies really look like new-born babies, and the liver really looks like it's ... the way they do it, so they do make it very ..." (H5,19)

at which point H7 mentioned his enjoyment of the production-values of the film. The childbirth sequence reminded another respondent of an article he had seen about childbirth:



"... it was identical to that ... in that everything was mechanical, everything was machine ... every birth in Germany is forced .../... this was an absolute parody ..."  
(L10,24-25)

Similarly, another respondent was reminded of the reality of organ transplant markets (L16,72).

A few respondents also indicated that they were more or less consciously identifying<sup>32</sup> with characters or predicaments in the film, as though they were 'real'.

"I felt very sympathetic with that woman talking about her period ... it's just this crazy talk that must come out in this awful situation ..."(H1,8)

For the same respondent, the sex education lesson was the funniest part of the film because it was

"... close to my own reality ... it's impossible, because how should anyone be bored, or should any of these pupils be bored and not pay any attention when it's a lesson on sex, especially when it's so openly discussed and in such a very sort of casual, but very open and straightforward a manner ..."(H1,2)

Another commented, in relation to the rugby match, that

"... I think you'd have to have gone to public school to find that really funny ... or you'd have had to play rugby ... as a kid ..."(L10,29)

Another respondent, in another group, observed that

"... I feel that the sort of school that they're using for that scene is more to do with the sort of school they went to, ..."(L5,94)

A number of respondents were sure that the 'best' humour is based on observation of the real. Praise of earlier Monty Python material included

"I think with their earlier performances what they seemed to do is take something that is fairly normal in life and put an edge on it, a twist on it .../... and it's very funny, because you can almost see that sort of thing happening ..."  
(H11,51)

and indeed the same respondent commented approvingly that

"... almost situation you're in, you can think of a parallel that they've done ..." (H11,60)

The situation comedy most appreciated by this sample seemed to be Only Fools and Horses, largely because of a perceived familiarity with the people associated with the programme (L17,33), the characters being "easily identifiable" (L21,40). For another respondent,

"... it's the situations that arise from real life that are funnier; it's the ironies and the expectations that aren't met, are undercut, which I think are funnier .../... kind of observation of life: look, this is how it is, and if you just slip that down a bit, ... it's something else again ... isn't it absurd, isn't life absurd? And I think it's hilariously funny ..." (L12,109)

The same person had amplified her response to Question 39 on the questionnaire:

"... I find real-life situations hilariously funny sometimes and become hysterical about them (i.e. laugh till I cry!!). Perhaps that is why I find so-called 'serious' programmes so funny rather than situation comedy - which is stilted and predictable." (Original emphasis)

One respondent did find that Meaning of Life contained examples of good/accurate observation. The teacher who appreciated the 'realism' of the pupils' boredom in the classroom also referred to the Penis Song in the restaurant:

"... chap saying, 'what a dreadfully witty song!' ... suggests that these people never listen to the words anyway! ... everybody thought it was wonderful; so again, you've got a little bit on observation ..." (H13,54)

This (art) teacher also suggested an additional touch of excremental realism:

"The fish idea was nice ... Again ... whenever I see goldfish there's always a great trail of shit dangling from them, you see, now not one of those had anything like this ... and they do ... other strange things, goldfish, ... it'd be so good if they had this! ... they were all sort of keeping their distance and swimming this way and that ... that

seemed a little sparse, ... just ready for a bit of development, that ..."(H13,61)<sup>33</sup>

Too close a relation to 'reality', on the other hand, could also threaten or indeed destroy enjoyment. Thus one respondent, during the hospital sequence, was relating

"... it to my own experiences in hospital and everything ... rather than maybe laughing ..."(L17,24)

As another speculated,

"... if it would be based on a true, really documentary or realistic I wouldn't laugh ..."(L16,74)

The comedic mode within which Monty Python 'violence' is set was recognized as important:

"... that kind of violence is no sweat, I mean I can take it; ... it's when you get the sort of television sequences about the violence that's actually happened, like someone's let a bomb go off in a store ... there's people all over the street with sort of bits off them, ... that's completely another field ..."(H11,63)

"... for example an injection ... I wouldn't mind to have it myself but I can't watch it; and that, the organ ... live transplant ... it's the way it's done .../... everything is over the top, ... it's a joke ..."(L16,71)

c) (xiii) recognition, repetition and datedness

This will be the last subsection on comedic and other pleasures, and here we pick up again the strand of recognition related to the 'anticipation' of pp.318-320 above. (cf. also pp.73-74 above)

For one respondent, the recognition of

"... certain catch-phrases and just seeing the Monty Python, when they dress up as women, they always use the certain voice ..."(H5,8)

was pleasurable. "Knowing what's going to happen" was clearly not

an obstacle for a number of subjects, though it is interesting that many of the examples cited by respondents were not from Monty Python. Thus for example one person referred to the continued liking for the Goons (L14,95), while another

"... found Fawlty Towers very funny and I still do ... I can still watch it again and again, and find it so funny that it hurts ... but I've never had that with Monty Python ..."  
(L10,31)

For one respondent, the pleasures of recognition/repetition were explicitly absent in Monty Python:

"... I tried to watch (And Now For Something Completely Different) and ... although again the familiarity, thinking about the parrot sketch ... I just thought oh no ... we were watching it on a small black and white TV, that's not ideal ... but I expected to enjoy it far more than I actually did"  
(L17,31)

Recognition was certainly not always pleasurable. The response of some was close to indifference:

"... you do tend to know the characters so well ... I don't think about that, I just (knew) what they were like, and I didn't gain any extra pleasure from seeing the same sort of characterisations again ..."(L6,84)

and indeed in one case recognition was described as quite unpleasurable:

"... watching the reruns of (That Was The Week That Was) quite recently; you sat there and you thought, oh my God! ... and we laughed at that ... quite one of the most disturbing things I've ever ... like losing your religion, isn't it, suddenly it doesn't mean anything ..."(L14,114)

One respondent (unwittingly) put his finger on the common ambivalence surrounding comedic repetition. Referring to a 'Festival of Cartoons' which he had seen,

"... everyone's laughing like mad for the first two or three ... and then after you laugh less and less because you're losing ... you always find, they are the same, ... the last one is as funny as the first one; .../... it's like Laurel and Hardy, you know you really laugh a lot at the first one, and after, then you just can't, or you lose your ability to laugh ..."(L16,67-68)

Shortly after this the reference to Laurel and Hardy recurs:

"... this famous Laurel and Hardy, they fight with all the cakes and cream and everything ... custard pies, you can see it a hundred times, you still will laugh ..." (L16,77)

Against the notion of recognition/repetition there is always the new. We have seen that novelty was one of the characteristics of Monty Python most valued by our respondents, and indeed one of them reported how, at the time of the original TV series, she would judge people according to their response to the programme:

"... I always imagined that it appealed to people who were very open-minded, ... if I sort of met people that didn't ... like it or when I played their record didn't find it funny, then that used to quite colour my judgement about them ..." (H5,21)

This is the same respondent for whom catchphrases/characterisations are now comfortably pleasurable (pg.335 above): a fine encapsulation of the tension so commonly observable between the new and the reassuring. The tension was articulated by another respondent:

"... it's pleasurable, like I'm meeting some old friends; but the humour is deadened somewhat because it's also predictable, so you have to weigh up a certain pleasure or warmth you get from that against the loss of cutting edge ... of humour ..." (L12,112)

If only the dichotomy was so straightforward! For many respondents the relation to recognition/repetition was not so comfortable, and for a number of them Monty Python had become quite 'dated'. We have already noted that it is quite possible to laugh or find pleasure despite "knowing what's going to happen", but for some of our respondents it was precisely 'knowing' in advance that was the problem. Thus for example in one case (H1) the 'absurdity' of the clock-scene in 'Fighting Each Other' was counteracted by the fact that she "knew what was going to come". When one respondent

referred to "knowing the repertoire"(L12,112) and the enjoyment of, for example,

"... seeing who's going to dress up as a woman this time, or who's going to play the stiff-upper-lip ..." (L12,112)

another replied that that was exactly why he no longer found it so funny (L5,112).

Datedness was explicitly identified by a number of respondents. For one, Monty Python humour had "aged very quickly" or become superceded by Mel Smith, Griff Jones etc. (L10,25), and had owed initial successes to its novelty-value, which was why "it appears so dated now"(L10,30). He remembered that he and his flat-mates had recently watched one of the repeated episodes

"... and we all turned it off, because we couldn't watch it ... I'm sure it was funny at least ten years ago ..." (L10,31)

Another continued to find some Monty Python programmes funny, but agreed that "it might have dated a little bit ..." (L16,69). A respondent who otherwise came across as very much a Monty Python 'fan' also agreed that

"... you've had so many things in between times that have gone along the lines of Monty Python ... now when you see the really old episodes, perhaps they do look a bit dated, ... because you've had so much other stuff ... when you've seen it again you tend to think well that's been done before, but it's been done by the copiers of Monty Python, ..." (H5,22)

a view endorsed by H7. This was elsewhere echoed by

"... there's a lot of that sort of humour around now, ... I think it's dropping off lately, ... The Young Ones ... humour centred around a sort of ... graphic slapstick ..." (L5,93)

and this respondent said that

"I think it's ... passé really ... Monty Python, almost ... I felt very passé ..." (L5,94)

This in turn followed a comment in the same discussion:

"... they set the whole thing off really ... they've just set a whole new trend, and therefore now you've had all what's come since, and recently there's like The Young Ones, with milkmen wandering around with cleavers in their heads ... Filthy Rich and Catflap, that sort of thing, ... when you go back to this sort of humour it doesn't have the shock-value it had originally ... it is dulled a bit, certainly ..." (L12,94)

This particular discussion did thus identify Monty Python as influential in the development of a particular strand of 'anarchic' comedicity:

"... they've set such a pattern for the way humour's gone through the seventies and eighties, ... that's the problem, they're ... not necessarily acknowledged as being as important as they are ... everyone kept saying, oh, Not The Nine O'Clock News, must watch that, ... yes, it's very funny, but I still thought it was very derivative of Monty Python, I thought, hang on, I've seen this before, ... the same even with The Young Ones, which I enjoy enormously but it's ... like a Monty Python sketch gone mad, isn't it ..." (L12,113)

For L5,

"... that's just institutionalised humour, ... to a big extent I think Monty Python is to a certain extent these days ... doesn't detract from how effective it has been; but I think it's institutionalised a lot ..." (L5,95)

The third respondent in this group put the cat among the pigeons (or was it Pythons) by agreeing with this, but finding that

"... all humour is going to be institutionalised, isn't it" (L14,95)

"... yes, ... that's where The Young Ones and that sort of humour seems to be ... I think another series of that ilk would be boring ... totally and utterly boring ..." (L5,95)

d) Some tendentious aspects of the comedic

We have identified in previous sections some ways in which the comedic can challenge the dominant social/symbolic order. Here we shall be examining the comments of our respondents in relation to

four such areas: the absurd, the violent, the sexual and the excremental. We shall then also consider the responses concerned with the (more obviously ideological) representations of gender, race and class in Meaning of Life.

d) (i) the absurd

In view of the centrality of the absurd/surreal to the Monty Python 'image', there were perhaps fewer unsolicited references to it than may have been expected.<sup>34</sup> Included in what follows are the several comments in relation to incongruity, to the subversion of expectations, to the 'bizarre'.

Some respondents expressed appreciation of the more evidently absurd sections of Meaning of Life. Thus of the Middle of the Film 'find the fish' sequence, one said

"... I thought that was wonderful, that was the thing that saved the whole thing ... that was the top spot ... that was a cracker! I mean had the fish not have been in, ... it wouldn't have got a '4' ... but again you know you don't do much of that in the film ..." (H13,61)

and the other person present added:

"I thought it was quite good ... very funny ... particularly the first time I saw it ..." (H11,62)

Another respondent also found this to be one of the funniest sections:

"... some of the things that appealed to me ... were the ones that were least motivated by any sort of sense of social satire ... I couldn't pin them down but that whole business about finding the fish, which I just found really funny, and totally bizarre .../... may be why it struck me as having this genuine sense of the absurd ..." (L13,72)

For another, the Mr. Creosote scene



"... makes me laugh, maybe because, the total absurdity of the scene ..." (L16,67)

For this respondent, the sequence

"... wanted to show the absurdity of language, and the way ... we're using it ..." (L16,66)

During that particular discussion I raised the distinction between 'social' comedy and the comedy of the 'irrational' (which corresponds broadly to John Ellis' categories of "comedy of social disruption" and "comedy of gags, illogicality and incongruity" (cf. pg.156)) and the same respondent commented:

"... that's why maybe I laugh, it's more irrational, totally absurd, .../... for me, irrational or absurd has to be comedy ..." (L16,74)

In the context of a discussion about 'intellectual' humour, another respondent enjoyed summarising the 'Jean-Paul Sartre sketch' from one of the TV episodes, and described it as

"... totally bizarre, but ... there's ... all sorts of elements there ..." (L12,108)

This was the respondent (cf. pp.298 & 334 above) for whom the most rewarding humour was rooted in everyday observation: "isn't it absurd, isn't life absurd ..." (L12,109).

For another person the absurdity of parts of Meaning of Life had a different relation to 'reality'. She was generally averse to exaggeration, but

"... I liked the thing with this big clock being set up and then ... this one was hit ... ding! going 'ding' ... I liked that ... I thought it was absolutely ridiculous ..." (H1,5)

If the absurd was amusing, it was because of the discrepancy in relation to 'reality'. Referring to the point in 'Fighting Each Other' when Eric Idle has had his leg bitten off, she spoke of

"... this absolute irrational and grotesque ... behaviour, the way they deal with ... it's so absurd; reality, it can't be realistic especially like the people say, ... what, and you didn't wake up? Exactly what I thought: how can one be so stupid ... it's just the contrast of what is normal and this makes me laugh and on top of that it's not only the contrast ... they take it as their real world and they exaggerate more and more, they have their own code within this contrast ..." (H1,6)

While this respondent could thus appreciate absurdity in relation to some (albeit absent) normative reality (indeed the formulation "it's just the contrast of what is normal and this makes me laugh" is a good description of the Freudian 'comic'), the more nonsensical absurdity of 'Find the fish' was another matter:

"... there was one sequence where I felt it was pure nonsense, ... there were three people, no two, the one with the ... ballet dance ... I didn't get that, I didn't understand, ... that was pure nonsense, the elephant, the person with these long arms and the other one, ... pure nonsense. I couldn't make anything of it, I didn't understand it ... ("And you didn't find it funny ...") ... No, no ... "(H1,6)

We have seen that H13 and L13 were particularly appreciative of the surreal/dada nature of this sequence; it was noted not infrequently that in comparison with the original TV series, Meaning of Life was less marked by this comedic mode.

"... that's also the sort of thing you'd expect more in the original series; and the cartoons were quite surrealistic, ..." (L12,100)

"... yes, the cartoons always were, but I'm not sure that I'd have expected anything like that sketch in the series" (L5,100)

H13 agreed that the 'Find the fish' sequence was "the only bit that's thrown in ..." (H13,62). Prompted, one respondent agreed that there was a relative absence of the surreal animation of the TV programmes, but felt that

"... this whole thing of the office building turning into a ship, ... that all seems to relate to it, it's not actually animated but ..." (L23,82)

to general agreement. Interestingly this respondent, who did not like the film as a whole, did commend the surreal/incongruous elements (L23,81).

Other responses to the nonsense-absurd were not so complimentary.

"... that scene with the fish thing, ... 'where's the fish?', ... that's the sort of Monty Python that I remember ... and yet ... I just thought it was rubbish ... I hadn't thought about that in terms of the television programmes before, ... it almost seemed to me to be a very schoolboyish sort of humour, and I didn't really like that bit at all, it wasn't very good ..." (L6,82)

and the other subject in this group who did like the surreal/incongruous Crimson Permanent Assurance section (pg.342 above) agreed about 'Find the fish':

"Oh, yes, that was one of my complete score zeros." (L23,82)

For L5 the surreality was disquieting:

"... vague perceptions of the world associated with public-school sensibilities, really strange sort of ideas, ... very bizarre ... surreal ... a bit more than just ... I thought that was quite exceptional ... exceptional, for them ..." (L5,100)

The same respondent had wondered whether the obviously imposed narrative 'structure' may have been a "marketing ploy" (cf. pg.289 above), and later commented on the tensions in the 'structure':

"Yes, it's just ... just stupid ..." (L5,109).

There were a number of references to 'incongruity'. One respondent in particular found one or two of the incongruities very amusing, and laughed a great deal even when recounting the examples:

"... you've got these two incongruous things, Noel Coward's voice and a song about dicks! .../... 'There he is now, you'll notice, chaps, that the penis is hard' ... 'what's that you've got there?' ... 'it's an ocarina, sir.' ...

'bring it here!' ... it's just again, this ... incongruousness ..."(H13,54)

We shall wonder again later whether this respondent's particular mirth was prompted by the incongruity described or by the nature of the subject-matter ... In the case of another respondent and the Penis Song, when I wondered why he laughed at the first mention of 'penis', his response was

"... it wasn't just the mention of the word 'penis' ... no, it was the juxta ... the incongruity, the comedy lies in the incongruity ..."(L13,66)

The other respondent present identified the incongruous context of the posh restaurant which made him laugh (L16,66).

Similarly for another respondent, the source of his amusement at the sex education lesson was the incongruity of sexual explicitness in the public-school context (H7,10).

The person for whom the absurd elements were among the only pleasurable features of the film found that

"... the initial incongruity of someone coming into a plush-looking restaurant and saying things like 'fuck off I'm full'; I found that amusing ..."(L23,82-83)

but he was also impatient with obvious overuse of the device:

"... there was sort of incongruity which was amusing to start with but it gets a bit laboured after a while; the idea of fighting with office stamps, and things like that ..."(L23,81)

The absurd also seemed to be linked to confounding/subversion of expectations:

"... going back to the schoolboy sketch, though, a lot of the pleasure of that was confounded expectation of other things"(L14,98)

In relation to the TV Jean-Paul Sartre sketch,

"... two housewives ... in the launderette, looking him up, ... it's when they're arguing about philosophy in the launderette .../... but it's just the same as ... the boys in school, ... it's totally unexpected ..." (L12,107)

In the same group also, the third respondent postulated a joke-model in terms of a systematic subversion of expectations:

"... I mean you're taking ... the unexpected, taking a situation, and giving it an apparent context, and suddenly changing it, I'd have said it was a joke ..." (L5,110) (cf. also pg.27 above)

Finally, there was a brief discussion with this same group of how comedians well before the second world war had been using material every bit as 'bizarre' as much of the absurd Monty Python. It is worth reminding oneself that absurdity was most certainly not 'invented' by the Monty Python team!

d) (ii) the violent

At various points above we have discussed the significance of aggressivity in (Freudian) models of the comedic, and also some of the historical and psychoanalytic developments in representations of fragmented bodies (cf. pp.150-151 & 163-167). How did our respondents react, for example, to the 'violence' of the Live Organ Transplants sequence? Were there other instances of more covert violence/aggressive humour to be observed?

Four of the respondents were not happy with the Live Organ Transplants sequence.

"... I really felt terrible with this ... ("but you were still laughing ...") ... yes, because ... oargh ... well, because of his face, ... he was feeling terrible as well,

this bloke ... and because it went on and on and on, and in the end I couldn't ... I just don't know if I really laughed, all the way through ... oh I hate, especially when he handled this organ and he cut the ... but that was terrible I felt"(H1,2)

This respondent also had difficulty with the war scene, and with the exaggerative violence of

"... this Zulu fight, where this boy ... he's stabbed, well it's absolutely unnecessary ..."(H1,5)

This respondent did recognize the distinction between modes of (comedic) violence:

"... in this first episode, with the Assurance Company ... I felt when he actually stabbed somebody ... this is what I find not ... I don't want to see that ... but, that he sort of is ... jumped out of the window, or that he falls out, ... I laugh about it, it's because I can't see blood actually ..."(H1,5)

Some forms of comedic 'violence' can consequently be amusing:

"... for example this game of rugby, ... oh it was so brutal ... ("yes, but it made you laugh") ... yes, it really did ... I feel there is no harm, they will get up again, these boys ... reminded me more of a mud-battle or whatever ... it wasn't really ... killing somebody"(H1,7)

Another respondent found the gore overwhelming.

"... I just find that sort of gore overwhelms any humour in it ... the impact ... of the idea that if you've got a kidney card then someone's going to come and take your kidneys, that initial thing's fairly funny but then I find all the spurting tomato ketchup gets a bit overwhelming"(L23,80)

"I don't want to see the detail of it ..."(L23,83)

The gory details jeopardised his enjoyment of other parts of the film:

"If that had happened ... in the first scene, that would have coloured my view of the entire film!"(L23,85)

Referring also to the Live Organ Transplants sequence, another respondent was thus dissatisfied:

"... much as I often tend to laugh at those things, I didn't for that one ... it was quite unfunny and there was an idea there and yet ... it wasn't very well developed or very well executed; and the idea ... he went down to the library and ... they were straight after him ... that didn't really come across very well ... that's the nearest I think I got to thinking, well that's very gratuitous, and I don't normally think that often that violence is that gratuitous ... but I did actually in that scene, I thought well what's the point ..."(L6,83)

A fourth person:

"... where he's actually holding the organs in his hand and he's trying to cut ... I found a bit repulsive ..." (L21,37)

This was later qualified:

"... I mean I'm quite hardened to something like that ... I did say 'repulsive' a couple of minutes earlier, but I wasn't repulsed ... to turn away or be violently ill or something ... but that's probably from seeing so many horror films, ..." (L21,38)

Characteristically this particular respondent had started with a more 'distanced' evaluation of how the sequence worked:

"... I think there was the basic concept for that ... they could possibly come along and take your organs while you're alive, and the way that ... the person answered the door and he said, well it's inconvenient, busy ... I think that was the only thing that was funny in that scene ..." (L21,37)

One respondent expressed indifference in these terms:

"... I felt the same about the ... liver transplant ... I actually kind of felt that something had left me ... as he was pulling these bits out and cutting them off .../... I didn't like it but at the same time it wasn't revolting ... it wasn't even kind of particularly close to .../... in a way it's fairly explicit but at the same time it's done so tongue in cheek, because it's so over the top ..." (L10,26)

Two other comments were made about how the Organ Transplants sequence could offend others.

"I suppose the transplant scene can be seen as sort of sick ... over the top ..." (H7,17)

"... I can think of lots of people ... would get up and walk out ... not because they objected to it on moral grounds or anything, but just because they found it physically ..." (L13,71)

One respondent agreed to being affected by the gruesomeness of the sequence, but still found it funny:

"... I found it pretty bad when I first saw it, I don't like a lot of blood spilling about ... right over the top, wasn't it ... I didn't feel too bright over it ... but I still thought it was funny ..." (H11,49)

This raises the interesting problem of those respondents who claimed not to find such a sequence funny but who did laugh. This is a difficult point to substantiate (cf. footnote 329 above) without more elaborate non-verbal transcription facilities, but H1, for instance, did agree to laughing. One laugher ('gelast'), H13, made no adverse comment about the sequence, noting instead that

"... I suppose it's inevitable that they become, that organs are ripped out and people explode because ... it's a progression of ideas ..." (H13,53)

When I pointed out that he particularly seemed to enjoy the aggressive/sadistic humour (for example the rugby match), this respondent replied laughingly:

"... there could have been ... you haven't got anything here, ... sadomasochism or anything like that ... this questionnaire ..." (H13,62)

In a similar vein, another respondent referred to an episode of The Young Ones,

"... in which ... Vivian gets decapitated by a train ... his head falls off, they kick his head around ... when I first saw it I just rolled around laughing ... it's not as gruesome as some of this ... but that's ... completely unmotivated ..." (L13,78-79)

There were very few other comments about the general issue of violent representations in Monty Python. The most explicit was



"... there's lots of unmotivated violence in Monty Python ... or sort of gruesomeness outside that ... the knight having his legs and arms chopped off until he's hopping around spurting blood ... or ... there's like somebody watching TV and the hand comes out of the TV and pulls someone's eye-balls out of their socket ... I suppose that is a comment of sorts but ..." (L13,75)

The gratuitous element was picked up by another respondent:

"I'm sure it's deliberate 'cos you know in the end, when he's saying what people want to see in the cinema these days is people with chainsaws cutting people up, ... I'm sure that was part of it ..." (L23,83)

Several respondents, then, were troubled by the arguably 'gratuitous' violence of some sections of Meaning of Life, though this did not necessarily destroy their enjoyment of those sequences.

d) (iii) the sexual

Again, we have dealt in earlier sections with the role of the sexual in the joke-mechanism, with the ways in which sexual humour can function as an infantile revolt (cf. pp.124-130 & 141-145 above). What did the respondents think of the sexual humour of Meaning of Life? I have looked especially for references to material in HAT section 2, which includes the childbirth scene, the Sperm Song, the Blackitts' discussion of Protestantism, and the sex education lesson, though clearly other comments may also turn out to be relevant. Remarks about the more obviously 'ideological' issue of sexism will be considered later, as will some (tentative) psychoanalytic interpretations of the respondents' comments.

There was a considerable degree of agreement that the 'sexual' sections of the film were the most amusing. Thus for example,

"I think I found the sex one funnier ..." (H5,10)

The group of L6, L22 and L23 agreed. Another respondent

"... liked the sex education lesson one as well ..." (L12,93)

H1 echoed this (4), and also provided one of the more 'personal' responses to the sexual material. For her, enjoyment of the sexual sequences was linked to transgression of taboos regarding what could be expected of representations of the classroom on film or TV.

"... on the one hand it's the taboo, and then ... it comes near to the crudest fantasies one can have ... that for example you have sex in the classroom in the widest sense ... this is probably something one way or the other, I have fantasies about, ... seeing it acted out ... in such a manner that all the ... excitement ..." (H1,3)

Asked why this should evoke a laughter response, the respondent went on:

"... first of all I felt it was a kind of ... embarrassment that he said 'the vaginal juices' and how can you produce them ... and I felt my God ... are they going to talk about it ... I was a bit embarrassed ... it's ... as if he's taught geography, or whatever ... and it is the highest level of feeling that it is a taboo, personal, and that it is handled in such a businesslike way, that helps me to laugh about it ... if it was dealt with in a porn way, I probably would have got fidgety, ..." (H1,3)

Enjoyment, then, was in this case linked to a novel/incongruous way of addressing a habitually taboo area.

Two other subjects expressed more or less qualified personal enjoyment of the sexual sections.

"... I think it tends to be rather sexual, overtly sexual and I think that puts a lot of people off; it doesn't bother me because I just think it's ... a laugh ..." (H11,49)

In the other case the respondent had greater difficulty convincing (himself) that he had enjoyed the sexual humour:

"... the sequence in the school where they really talk on sex; but everything, all the detail, you know, it's like, you really start, not to feel embarrassed, but you're not used, you know, to this kind of ... and after, if you accept

it, it's going to be extremely funny, because you imagine ... all those people who repress all these expressions .../... I don't understand all those words you know on sex for example ... there are words I still don't understand ... I never saw it when it was subtitled, you know, because ... so there are still some expressions in the film I just don't understand ... it's very strange because I don't find that sequence very very funny, it makes me laugh inside, you know it doesn't shock me, but I don't feel like laughing like some other parts of the film ... I don't know, I just can't ... it doesn't shock me at all, I mean, because I do understand that point of view, what they want to do, but I can understand, if you see it, you know in a big cinema and audience doesn't respond very much, so you can start to feel embarrassed ..."(L16,65-66)

These examples throw up the problem of according more 'personal' status to some responses than to others (the latter instance is quoted in full to illustrate this). One or two respondents appeared to remain resolutely distanced from their own direct experience, notably L21 (cf. pg.292 above):

"... the scene with sex, ... the use of actual language was a bit heavy-handed, a bit explicit, to make the actual ... the actual sex sort of um comic ... it was too ... serious ..."  
(L21,37)

At the same time, he felt that there was a problem with

"... the more sexual ... type of jokes ... which aren't really that significant in Monty Python films, although it did crop up quite a bit in here ... they would probably take in more of the sort ... of crude vulgar type of person of society, the person who enjoys ... sexual jokes ..."  
(L21,39)

Though this respondent would, if pressed, no doubt have agreed to differentiate among different kinds of sexual humour, others did in fact make that distinction with regard to Meaning of Life:

"... there are very different levels of attitudes to sex in the movie; ... on one hand you've got the very explicit discussion in the class, ... you get kind of saturated with the stuff, and I think they actually achieved a genuine shocking capacity somehow ... in the dialogue of that scene to a certain extent, but then you've got these half-naked women chasing around, and that's using sex in its very traditional

Carry-on film type of way ... that's one of the problems of the film, is that they can't quite decide what they're doing ..."(L13,66)

More often comments concentrated on the presence in the film of the first of these two modes:

"... there's this sense in which Monty Python is sending up that aspect; it says 'penis' and 'fuck'; it's not saying it in the spirit with which some of the people who say it find it funny ..."(L22,87)

The innuendo of Benny Hill was also frequently counterposed to the kind of sexual humour in Meaning of Life; for example for one respondent Monty Python could be excused occasional touches of sexism because

"... they actually poke fun at a hell of a lot of things in society, so you can't just isolate that; whereas Benny Hill ... takes the 'general line' ... which is, let's poke fun at women, or let's have a cheap thrill, at women's expense ..."(L12,101)

And for another

"... for example, Benny Hill ... most of his comedy is based on sex, but I would sit there and watch it and I wouldn't laugh at all ..."(L6,86)

This group (L6, L22, L23) spent a little time debating whether sex is/can be of itself funny. The discussion was a good encapsulation of the interplay between 'personal' and 'detached' modes; but the comments of L6 in particular are pertinent.

"... sex does tend to be, it always brings laughs, and it always is ... funny but ... within just that section I enjoyed the Birth one which I think is less, ... sex-related than the other sections but ... the other sections were still slightly funnier than the rest of the film ... I think sex is so much part of comedy that you can have a bad sexually-oriented sketch, and you might laugh at it; but ... it's just another aspect of humour, just because it's sex doesn't make it more taboo or any more funny ... any more, anyway, I think ... because it's been dealt with over quite a lot of things ..."(L6)

When questioned about the apparent contradiction in his previous statement, L6 replied

"Yes, it does slightly but ... I'll try to clarify that, say I'm a politician now ... what I meant was ... that quite often sex is dealt with in comedy and sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's not, but just the fact that it's sex doesn't mean that it's necessarily funny ... which I think was the point ... you were trying to say that ... maybe that people do react in that way ... so probably it's more likely to be ... dealt humorously with ..." (L6,86)

One of the respondents picked up the historical/cultural relativity of some sexual humour:

"... you were talking about Benny Hill but, going back into older films, you know Carry On films or whatever, ... dropped trousers or anything like that, and it's a laugh lined up ... I think in these jaded days it's not so automatic ..." (L23,86-87)

and L6 related this to expectation:

"I think it depends who says it ... you sort of expect it in a film like Monty Python, any film like that ... that there will be some mention of 'penis' or 'fuck' or whatever; but if somebody who you don't expect to say a word like that says it, then it can be funny; I think it's expectation as well ..." (L6,87)

Here we are back in the field of repetition and novelty, and the comedicity associated with the subversion of taboos.

A number of comments were made, often by respondents who showed visible signs of enjoyment/laughter (cf. footnote 5 and pg.328 above), about the structure/performance of the sections containing sexual humour. This may have constituted a kind of displacement of a more personal response. Thus one respondent said of the Penis Song,

"... I think it's the way it's done ... because it's done in that 'Noel Coward' manner, ... if Benny Hill come along and just sort of sung it, the way someone like Benny Hill would do it ... it would just be for its own sort of sake, it would sort of fall flat, but ... the way they go about and present ... a joke or whatever, it's not just sort of flung right at you ... it's got a good foundation, ..." (H7,10)

Some comments were more critical; for example one person felt that some of the ideas needed developing:

"... or keep them going longer, in a lot of cases; I really enjoyed the ... sex education class .../... very good ... but it could have had more to it, it could have gone on longer or it could have been developed ... there were so many things like that, it was a great idea and then it would be backed up ... and then there's be a filler ... like ... 'Every Sperm is Sacred' ... I mean I didn't, I didn't ... I liked it, I liked it, but I didn't like the song, I thought the song went on far too long"(L10,28)

On the other hand, there was an opinion (of the Sperm Song sequence) that one had

"... gone through a whole sequence where they've been talking about ... sex, not perhaps directly so much but ... in a roundabout way, and I think people tend to settle, I settle into a, ... rut, and I say well this is about ... (?) ... then I'm looking really for something to shake me out of it ..."(H11,55) (cf. also L5, L12,97 and pg.298 above)

Sexual humour was also discussed by some respondents in terms of enjoyment of its incongruity (cf. pg.344 above). When I suggested with one group that the effectivity of the sex-education sequence was helped by the fact that it was about sex, the response was

"I don't think ... I suppose so, because ... they've taken the ultimate, which you'd think, ... boys would be interested in, but in a classroom situation, you turn off ... whatever it is ..."(H13)

"... that ... almost opens up the sketch, talking about vaginal juices, and I think there's a shock impact in that ... the headmaster, coming in and leading straight off into things like that ..."(H11) (54)

As we have seen, another respondent's comment about the Penis Song was that

"... it wasn't just the mention of the word 'penis' ... no, it was ... the incongruity, the comedy lies in the incongruity ..."(L13,66)

The separation in psychoanalytic terms between the 'sexual' and the excremental is fragile. The elusive 'Martin Luther' sequence would have furnished a suggestive link between the two.

"... it's about sex and going to the toilet ..." (Q,58)

d) (iv) the excremental

Excremental humour (and the 'excremental revolt' more generally) have been discussed above (pp.125-127 & 143-149 & 165-168). In what follows, the majority of comments relate to the Mr. Creosote restaurant sequence, but there are also a few observations of a more general nature. It is necessary here to define as 'excremental' anything which is 'dirty', and in this sense vomiting (and exploding) are excremental activities.<sup>35</sup>

Altogether fourteen of the sixteen respondents made significant comments on excremental humour, compared with fifteen who spoke of sexual humour. This contrasts with twelve who commented on the absurd/incongruous, and nine who contributed something about 'violent' humour.

As with the instances of 'violent' humour, there was a considerable ambivalence in many of the responses; even those for whom the vomiting of the Mr. Creosote episode was "too much" had usually laughed. We shall look at the possible significance of this below. Similarly, there was also the common mixing of personal responses and detached observations. A characteristic response of the latter type came again from L21:

"... there wasn't really that much I would say was exceptionally funny ... possibly ... the one with the fat man at the table, basically because it's an attack on the posh people, ... the way that they isolate themselves from the fat person eating at the table ... it's a bit crude, but the way that he's being sick ... you don't usually see that in a film, it's original ... funny way of being original ..." (L21,36)

Some found the Mr. Creosote sequence very funny:

"... the scene in the restaurant ... I didn't know how far they will go ... it make me really laugh and laugh ..." (L16,64)

"... the scene in the restaurant makes me laugh, I don't know why but it just makes me laugh, maybe because, the total absurdity of the scene ... they went so far, and for me it's really incredible ..." (L16,67)

"... I just can't explain it because really it should shock me ... that enormous person ... first as I say it was a shock when I (saw) it the first time, I didn't know where they wanted to go .../... it's only for example the way you see that woman, she's cleaning and she receives everything on her back ... I can't explain why it makes me laugh, I've no idea really ..." (L16,69)

This respondent did later say that

"... that's why maybe I laugh, it's more irrational, totally absurd, ..." (L16,74)

Another respondent had not seen the film before.

"... I'd heard about the sketch ... the expanding man who blows up, and that was very funny ..." (L5,92)

Another, who had seen it a few times, spoke specifically of the Mr. Creosote sequence:

"I certainly thought that was the funniest ..." (H11,47)

"... that is certainly the high-point of it ..." (H11,48)

"... every time I look at that, there's some little other bit that you can see ..." (H11,49)

This in fact contrasts with the reaction of another respondent:

"... I think I remembered ... the Mr. Creosote sketch really did crease me when I saw it at the cinema, but ... it's one of those things that you can only laugh like that when you see it the first time; the second time you know what's happening so it's not so funny ..." (L6,80)



Another respondent clearly also enjoyed the sequence:

"... the only one I found extremely funny was the man exploding ... I thought that was great ..." (H13,47)

He also showed a very casual/playful attitude to the excremental, with comments about

"... these wonderful little memories of men exploding and so forth ..." (H13,58)

and about how some goldfish with a "great trail of shit dangling from them" (H13,61) would have enhanced the realism of the film. He was also sure that "everybody would say" that the high point was the Mr. Creosote sketch (H13,47). Certainly there were some references to the popularity of the excremental in Monty Python: one person described how, while watching the film with other students, it had been

"... very interesting to see what bits people laughed at ... and some of the very obvious jokes ... anal humour type things, there were people that would be ... literally sort of rolling on the floor ..." (L12,107)

Another had a friend who

"... saw it in France ... he said people were really dying laughing during that sequence ..." (L16,69)

One respondent who enjoyed the excremental humour, however, had had a different experience. He had

"... watched it with other people and they've found it absolutely revolting, in fact they've been turned off by the whole thing ..." (H11,47)

This was echoed by someone in another group:

"... I dreaded that bit ... I remember when I first saw it in the cinema, the whole cinema going (vomit sound) ... because it's so horrible! It's revolting ..." (L14,93)

There were several reports of a more straightforward dislike for the Mr. Creosote sequence.

"... I felt quite uneasy with ... that vomiting bit ... when he vomited onto the cleaning-woman, ... I felt was a bit too much ..." (H1,2) (cf. also H1,8)

This respondent's sympathy for the discomfiture of others in the restaurant (including the cleaning-woman) may indeed have been a displacement of her own anxieties.

Two other respondents agreed with each other.

"... I didn't like just the sickness ... I didn't find that at all funny ..." (L17)

"I didn't either ... I just thought it was gross ..." (L10) (24)

Later, the latter respondent added

"... I found that exploding fat man really gross ... I also found myself looking ... to see ... exactly how much blood and guts are they going to give us ... I didn't find that offensive but I didn't like it either ..." (L10,26)

and the other respondent repeated that she

"... didn't like that whole idea ... it was presumably supposed to be very funny that this guy kept vomiting and vomiting .../... I suppose that some peoples' ... sense of humour's a bit more basic than mine, but I mean I can ... laugh at slapstick humour as well ... I sometimes do find jokes about bodily functions funny, sometimes I don't ... I mean there just doesn't seem to be anything apart from, that was the joke, it wasn't in any other context, OK he was being sick so as he could make room for something else, ... there just didn't seem enough to it, ... just was being sick all the time ..." (L17,27)

One of these two did, however, accept that he had found the sequence amusing, albeit for other reasons. When challenged about the fact that he had been laughing, his response was

"... I was laughing at John Cleese, I think ... again. ... I was laughing at him and I was laughing at the parody ..." (L10,24) (cf. also L10,27)

Another respondent expressed his dislike thus:

"... this one I didn't really get on with. I mean all the, like the Mr. Creosote sketch, and Live Donations I just find that ... gore overwhelms any humour in it ..." (L23,80)

"... I found the overwhelming tenor of the gore and the puking and so on, just ... overwhelmed by it ..." (L23,81)

He accepted the initial incongruity of the gross Mr. Creosote:

"... someone coming into a plush-looking restaurant and saying things like 'fuck off, I'm full!' ..." (L23,82-83)

but drew the line at the vomiting.

"... the idea of people becoming covered in vomit just didn't get to me at all ..." (L23,83)

Finally, there was criticism of the sequence from a respondent who was otherwise warmly positive about Monty Python. Asked whether Mr. Creosote was "the funniest sketch", her response was

"No, I didn't think that was the funniest .. it was so revolting, ... you don't even like to look at it, for fear of ..." (L12,92)

Almost immediately she went on:

"... I thought it was very funny but I thought it was quite revolting, it was a kind of horror, ... a kind of mixture of 'yeucch' dread and I actually felt quite nauseous at one point ... I thought if he pukes again I really, I can't look because it's making me want to vomit actually ..." (L12,92)

When I pointed out that she had still been laughing during the sequence, she replied:

"... but it was laughing at the horror, ... the horrific kind of revoltingness ..." (L12,92)

We shall return to this and other similar remarks below when we reflect on why the respondents said what they said.

d) (v) sexism, racism, and the socially tendentious

We can begin by noting the sheer volume of discussion generated in this area; there has consequently been a greater need to condense, to select the most pertinent comments. I propose to concern myself mainly with the instances of arguably sexist/racist humour in Meaning of Life, though on several occasions respondents did talk much more broadly about these issues. L5, L12 and L14, for example, engaged in a substantial discussion about sexism and humour, taking up a number of examples unconnected with Monty Python. For details of this and other material, cf. Appendix 4.

It will be as well, also, to reaffirm that ideology is pervasive stuff (cf. pp.14 ff. & 308-311 above), and that we shall here be dealing with respondents' comments about a fairly limited part of the 'ideological'. We must also bear in mind the distinction between definitions of ideology as unconscious (cf. especially pp.131-135 above) and the realm of conscious opinion, of offence caused by particular kinds of representations.

Before looking at specifically (arguably) sexist/racist elements in the humour of Meaning of Life, let us consider briefly some other/more general observations made by the respondents. A good introductory remark may be

"Everything that's comic could be perceived as offensive  
..."(L21,44)

- or, to paraphrase in Freudian terms, all jokes are tendentious (cf. pg.111). To recognize this may, however, bear no relation to 'real' lived experience; the same respondent felt that

"... depends on the individual ... for myself I don't really care what actually gets shown ... it's only a film ... I don't think you should really take material that seriously ..."(L21,45)

Several respondents did identify the possibility of offence.

"I was with somebody who I think objected to particular ... things like the, you know the baby dropping at the beginning and that kind of thing ... she found it kind of sexist, offensive in a number of ways ..."(L13,65)

"... but I can understand, like ... in the 'Third World', the Third World called Yorkshire ... I found it funny but it's, it can be offensive, I can understand ..."(L16,70)

"I found that funny, and I'm from Yorkshire!"(L13,70)

Another, who had found the Upper-Class Twit of the Year sketch in And Now For Something Completely Different funny although she felt it discriminated against handicapped people,

"... didn't really find anything discriminating ... against ... well, not this 'Jews' sequence ... nor women ... OK this scene, but it was not overtly discriminating against ... of course you could say that for example this 'All Sperms Are Sacred' ... you could call it discriminating ..."(H1,7)

Two other respondents indicated less sympathy for anyone offended by the humour at the expense of religion:

"... going back to the sperm, and the irate god, I'm expecting this ... to really lay into the Catholics, ... but he lets them off very gently ... shame ... (to H11:) you're not a Catholic are you?"(H13,55-56)

"... any poking at religion is always good for a laugh with me!"(L23,85)

Another respondent, who had earlier said he had "no strong feelings" (H7,13) about representations of women in Meaning of Life, felt there "could be quite a few things"(H7,16) which could be objectionable to various people. His partner remembered that a friend had found the use of children for the 'Sperm Song' sketch shocking and

agreed that the undermining of childrens' 'innocence' could be "upsetting for a lot of people, especially parents"(H5,17).

There was a great deal of debate, of varying degrees of complexity, about whether certain representations/elements in Meaning of Life/Monty Python were sexist. One respondent, referring to the hospital sequence, said

"... a couple of women (I know felt (?)) disturbed by the ... the way that she's just taken for granted and not given any ... special attention ..."(L21,45)

When I contrasted this sequence, where the lack of care accorded the woman is arguably being ridiculed, with the (gratuitously 'aggressive') way in which the female figure is impregnated in the 'Promenade through the stars' song, he responded

"... anyone who felt disturbed by that image, I would have thought would have been more towards the sort of feminist area ... sort of tread carefully here! ... they're actually being used rather, not as a person but more for, to sort of give birth ..."(L21,45)

Some remarks were concerned with the representations of women in the original TV series.

"... the only real woman in it was Carol Cleveland, who'd sort or come on as a dumb pin-up type, I remember there was a lot of controversy with the first series that the images of women were all highly dubious ..."(L23,90)

More subtly,

"... it's a bit tricky, ... like, the old ones with Carol Cleveland, she's always like the busty sort of secretary, but there she's so over the top, it's almost taking the mickey of people who ... do the sexist things, ... it's sort of borderline ..."(H5,13)

Although

"I never thought that Monty Python was particularly noted for its feminist tendency; ... the Crimson Assurance one, where there's a woman, she's sent to put the kettle on; I noticed that ..."(L14,98)

many of our respondents seemed, like L12, to have at least partly  
'trusted' Monty Python, and may have agreed that

"... it is a question of how much you trust them in terms of  
the other social comment that comes from the other sketches  
... speaking as somebody who's a feminist, I suppose I could  
say I presume you do trust them; if I didn't, I wouldn't  
find them funny, in the way that I don't find Benny Hill  
funny ..." (L12,101)

Though one or two implied that the sequence did not bother them  
(L10, L17, 26-27), L10's precise answer to the question "is there a  
problem with some of the gags?" was

"... yes there is and at the same time I just kind of let it  
go by ..." (L10,26)

A lively debate about the cleaning-woman incident took place in  
most of the discussion groups. For one respondent the incipient  
sexism was removed, or at least complicated, by the fact that the  
cleaning-woman was played by one of the Pythons (H13,57). A poten-  
tially crucial point for a number of respondents was the fact that  
this was Terry Jones in drag. Did this work against the potential  
sexism of the scene? One person implied it did not:

"... always this thing with Monty Python as well that many of  
the major women characters are ... I'm not sure which two it  
is in drag, I'm sure that's ... to do with their sexist  
attitudes ..." (L23,89)

For some it did.

"... if it would have been an actual female playing that  
role, it would have been more of an attack, more explicit;  
as it's a man playing a woman, you see it more as comedy  
rather than attacking a certain part of society ... although  
it is attacking a certain part of society ... if they would  
have had an old cleaner then you would have felt sympathy  
possibly for what she was saying ... also would have felt  
sympathy or shock at a bucket being put over her head, but  
as it's somebody obviously in drag, ..." (L21,47)

More succinctly,

"... you look at them and you see they're men dressed up, they're not really meant to be representing women ..."(L17,26)

Another woman noted that

"... they dress up as women a lot .. and I don't find that objectionable, ... at all ..."(L12,99)

and later qualified her reaction of shock at Mr. Creosote vomiting over the cleaning-woman with

"... she was getting, getting it, then I thought well hang on a minute, that's a man dressed up as a woman ... I mean I wouldn't actually call them sexist ..."(L12) (101)

L23 would not have been convinced:

"... so it's all right for men in drag to portray women as stupid and ugly ..."(L23,90)

The comments of one respondent were interesting in their rationalist refusal of the complexities of the unconscious:

"If you had a film which say had a male cleaner ... I wouldn't sort of pinpoint on the vomiting bit, 'cos I don't think he's attacking women, he's not vomiting on her because she's a woman, ... but in a film which attacks social convention, ... to enhance the comedy, you have to show things which ... people perceive as things around them in society ... the stereotyped roles; if it was a man being vomited on, in a cleaner's clothes, it might not be so funny, I'm not saying it's funny because it's a woman, it might not be so funny because you're not able to see it as an actual social thing ... if say like it was a 50:50 place in society, where there was 50% male cleaners, 50% female cleaners, than you could decide whether you wanted a male or a female cleaner, but ... the problem with society is that there's a significant majority of female cleaners, so I think you have to depict a female cleaner ..."(L21,45-46)

"... I didn't actually perceive any attack on a female, or I didn't also perceive she was on her knees, I just saw that she was on her knees cleaning; I didn't see she was on her knees, she was being attacked, vomited on; ... in comparison, ... Mildred Pierce, at the end of that, you have those two ladies ... it's made obvious that they're attacking the female role in society ... it's actually put there to sort of show that the women are trodden down ... things like that, which, it's not being shown in the Monty Python film ..."(L21,46)

The point about 'reflecting social reality' was also taken up by



another respondent, who was concerned about why opposition to sexism (for instance) always had to be signposted:

"... what the Python team are doing here, they're saying 'let's give it our veto', 'we disapprove of such statements'; now ... do they have to do this all the time; if you raise an issue in a film, like abuse of women, or anything sexist, do you have to say, 'I disagree with that, I disagree with that'; ... you can show an example of this, can't you, why does somebody have to say 'Oh that's bad isn't it? .../... it certainly doesn't encourage any things which ... most right-thinking people would be against, does it ... I mean it doesn't encourage abuse of women ..."(H13,57)

The other generally agreed 'cause for concern' in Meaning of Life was the chase sequence in the 'Death of Arthur Jarrett' section of 'Death'. (I was unable to interest anyone in my concern with the animation sequence depicting a woman's impregnation: "I didn't mind that, I thought it was quite good"(L17,27)). In this sequence, a group of young bare-breasted women chase the convicted Arthur Jarrett to his death.

"I felt a bit ... they could have chosen another ... because it said, this victim could choose his own way of dying, and so he could have chosen anything else, but he chose the sexist way ..."(H1,1)

Though it is true that this respondent needed to be reminded exactly what Arthur Jarrett's offence had been ("Making gratuitous sexist jokes in a moving picture"), she still felt that, as actually filmed,

"... it's just ... reinforcing the joke, or making the joke visual what he's accused of ..."(H1,1-2)

Others agreed.

"... that concerns me a bit .../... I found that possibly the more uncomfortable part, because I couldn't actually see what the point of that was ... I found that a bit disconcerting ..."(H11,57-58)

"... well that is harder ... they were actually self-consciously saying, weren't they, the reason he ... died was

for actually doing a sexist joke ..."(L12,98) (cf. also L6,89)

On one level the sequence can be 'excused' because the sexist images are diegetically motivated.

"... having said that this guy was guilty of the making of a gratuitously sexist joke, it then gives them the excuse to have shots of women, boobs flying all over the place, so perhaps that's giving them the licence ... if they hadn't had that beforehand, you'd think mm, nasty sexist imagery, ... but because he's chosen it as his punishment ..."(L23,89)

As another respondent put it,

"... I think ... they're covering themselves ..."(H13,58)

This was endorsed elsewhere:

"... if they hadn't said that bit about what he's been sentenced for; if he'd been sentenced for robbing a bank or something, then I would have thought ... Benny Hill again, ... sexist stuff, but because they put that in, he's been sentenced for gratuitous ... sort of made it, ... I didn't mind that there were loads of naked women running across ... 'cos then it was taking the mickey out of ... sexist things ..."(H5,13)

Some, however, were not satisfied with this argument. We have seen that H1 was unimpressed, and another respondent felt that

"... there again, it's through his eyes, that is very much his fantasy ... the film's not really saying women are like this ... I didn't like the camera shot on the woman's ... breasts going up and down, but again, ... the excuse, it's supposed to be this man's fantasy ..."(L17,26-27)

One person wondered:

"... are they actually joining the bandwagon, that's what's a bit difficult ..."(L12,101)

A good summary of the problem had already been offered earlier in the same discussion:

"... they're putting their own sort of safety net ..."(L5,98)

The chief instance of 'racist' humour was identified as the 'cleaning-woman''s remark "at least I never worked for Jews" in the aftermath of the Mr. Creosote sketch;<sup>36</sup> only one person referred to Terry Gilliam's introduction to the Middle of the Film:

"... a guy walks on in a Zulu suit, unzips it and it is in fact an immaculate white guy in a suit, and then speaks with a, with an African accent; which I didn't think was funny, ... it even crossed my mind, ... that maybe I shouldn't be laughing at it ... but I found it quite ... ingenious, clever. But not necessarily funny, I don't think I did find it funny ..." (L22,89)

Many respondents picked the 'cleaning-woman' part of the Mr. Creosote sequence as potentially objectionable, but responses were in fact quite varied. One person was not shocked, but could not understand why (L16,72-73). Another identified 'laziness' as a reason for accepting' racist humour:

"... It's too much effort to sort of say in a group of people, oh I object to that joke, so you sort of smile ... it's an easy way out, ... and at the time, perhaps you don't really think about it, it's just 'a joke' ... you don't think till afterwards, you know, I don't really like ... calling someone a Paki, ... it's a mixture of things, ... sort of an easy way out ... you'd rather not go against the grain ..." (H5,14)

The respondent who had argued strongly that Mr. Creosote vomiting over the cleaner-woman was not an "attack on women" did say that

"... they attack Jewish people ... as well ... which they did in that as well ..." (L21,44),

- a reference to Life of Brian. Only one respondent said that the punishment of a bucket of vomit was enough to legitimate the 'joke':

"... the part at the end of the Creosote scene, where the cleaning lady's talking about ... ends up 'at least I don't work for Jews' ... but then that's totally defused because the bloke's shocked and horrified, tips a bucket up over her ..." (H11,56)

Asked "but does that make it completely OK?" the response was

"I think so, yes ..." (H11,56)

The co-respondent (H13) agreed with this, and H11 went on:

"... someone doesn't approve of it, ... there's someone in there who you can actually sort of label if you like as establishment, the ... head waiter, in a posh restaurant, and he's ... shown that he's offended ..." (H11,56-57)

It may be interesting that no-one remarked that the person who made (and was punished for) the racist remark was none other than the 'woman' over whom Mr. Creosote had earlier been sick.

It may also be more interesting, however, to point out that no fewer than three respondents had faulty recollection of the "I never worked for Jews" incident. One (L21,47) simply said he did not remember the line, but another described the scene thus:

"... suddenly she is talking, she was at the Prado and the British Museum and the Academie Française, and the other one is probably ... the waiter has got fed up, and he put all the ... that's why I laugh, ... because ... she's just doing some cheap philosophy, ..." (L16,77)

When I interjected "well, no, it's because she says 'I never worked for Jews'", his response began simply and laughingly, "... yes, I ... I know ..." (L16,77). The oddest recollection came when a Jewish respondent identified the potentially racist comment:

"... the woman who's talking about leaving the British Museum and working for a dirty Jew ..." (L6,89)

When I pointed out that these were not the cleaning-woman's words, he continued

"... it's all right, I can say it, 'cos I'm Jewish! ... working for a Jew, sorry, I didn't mean to be bad shit, it's the dirty vomit compared to ... obviously they were trying to say something about it ..." (L6,89)

Whether this respondent was 'really' offended or not, we cannot say. This simply seems the appropriate point at which to record another respondent's experience with an episode of The Young Ones:

"... I've shown that to a few people, who were really offended by some of it ... Alexei Sayle does various sort of impersonations ... there's a South African one, ... Alexei Sayle, in the last episode, does an impersonation of a Jewish landlord, he kind of comes in, he slashes up all the furniture, and charges them 200 ... I sort of laughed along with it, but I showed it to a couple of Jewish people, and ... they were actually really pissed off by this ..."(L13,79)

One possible 'defence' against allegations of racist/sexist humour in Monty Python TV programmes and films is to argue that the group have consistently 'attacked' everything and everyone, or at least a wide spectrum of targets. We are back here with the notion of balance.

One respondent referred to Terry Jones' portrayal of women:

"... you could say that Terry Jones is ... debasing women, ... there's always the fag, and the curlers ... but there again when you had that Protestant scene, you had, like Graham Chapman ... saying, 'I can go down and buy a wotsit' and she's going 'why don't you, why don't you', and it makes him out to be a real twit, so ... it's then taking the mickey out of a bloke that could be like that ... so I think the balance ... you don't get angry, because you think well, it's balanced, somehow ... and you get the stupid army people ... they make the blokes in the army as twits, so it sort of balances it up, it's not all against women ... really they poke fun at everyone and anyone that ... they can think of, ..."(H5,14)

For another,

"... the main thrust of their humour always seemed to be anti-establishment, so it was always picking on the army and public-school headmasters and figures of the Establishment; ... there's always that sort of check and balance, ... like 'Private Eye', kind of have a go at everything, ..."(L12,100)

"... they actually poke fun at a hell of a lot of things in society, so you can't just isolate that ..."(L12,101) (cf. also L21,46)

Speaking in a different way of the hospital sequence, another respondent was saying much the same thing:

"... all the good ingredients, sort of irreverence ... just the way they sort of ridiculed the system, the hospital system, and the doctors and the Establishment ... a little bit of gore ... not too much, ... just right, a good mixture of things ..." (L6,84)

Three respondents in pursuit of equilibrium pointed out that the cleaning-woman was not alone in being subjected to Mr. Creosote's vomit.

"... and also John Cleese was getting splattered, wasn't he ..." (L12,101) (L5 agreed) (cf. also L21,46 and H11,57)

We have noted the scepticism of one respondent (L5) regarding the possibility of any radical satire or criticism given the background of the Monty Python team; this respondent would presumably have viewed the notion of 'balance' with suspicion. One other person did voice reservations, though from a slightly different perspective:

"... this film was rather unconvincingly striving for balance or something ... I mean, people kept kicking around Bunuel as a kind of comparison when this came out ... but when they are going to criticise Catholicism they have to put a balancing critique of Protestantism, which I didn't think was that funny, ... I could almost see them thinking, we can't get away with this, we've got to have, ... the balancing statement is there; also there's this peculiar sort of comment at the end where they were ... trying to excuse themselves by making that statement about 'let's have lots of pictures of penises so we can get the shock-value', ... kind of incorporate what may well have been their strategy, in a way, into the film ..." (L13,70)

An interesting balance-related comment was made by one respondent about the Sperm Song sequence:

"... they're also taking the mickey out of the working-class man, ... a kind of classist thing ..." (L12,99)

This led to a consideration of 'classism' which was entirely confined to this particular group. The same respondent admitted that

"... in talking about sexism and that I think what I'm saying is, it's a classist thing ..." (L12,99)

to which another replied

"... I could object quite easily to that sketch, with the babies being born ... you know, too thick for contraception and all that ... I could object, basically because I'm a Yorkshire person ... I could be so upset ... it sort of annoys me, but ... it comes back to ... are they aware of themselves being a bit stupid .../... but they do it from a very very pampered position ..." (L5,99-100)

This group did, however, agree about the 'anti-classist' potential of the Jean-Paul Sartre sketch in one of the TV episodes:

"... which in fact ... could be said to work against the sort of classist notions of ignorance and so on ... apparently really sort of ... progressive ..." (Q,108)

There was, then, an ambivalent response to the issues of sexism and racism (and 'classism'). Comedic elements raising these questions were readily identified by many respondents, but most could not help giving way to pleasurable response. One comment can stand as an effective summary.

"... obviously they were trying to say something about it ... trying to bring in something to do with racism, sexism, within the humour ... they were almost maybe making ... a statement ... even though they were stooping to the levels of racism and sexism, they were saying that it was maybe slightly wrong ... but that doesn't mean that they're not exploiting it ..." (L6,89)

e) Shock-value, 'smut' and the comedic

We dealt in an earlier section (pp.127-130 & 140-143) with the role of 'smut', of the obscene, in the comedic. The distinctions between sexual, excremental and violent material in relation to smut/shock did not emerge very strongly in the discussions, and

indeed in view of the primary nature of the repressions involved those distinctions may not be particularly relevant.

Can 'smut' be funny independently of a comedic context? It is worth noting that although I posed the question (at least once) with most groups, the majority of respondents had trouble engaging with it. There was, though, certainly some recognition that sex in particular is exploited for comedic effect:

"... it depends on the way that the material's being exploited .../... possibly the more sort of teenage type of, exploitation of skin .../... with those sort of teenage films, the only reason is to exploit male and female genitalia or whatever ..." (L21,41)

We have already considered above (pp.343-344) some remarks on this subject, including

"... sex does tend to be, it always brings laughs, and it always is ... funny .../... sex is so much a part of comedy that ... you can have a sort of bad sexually-oriented sketch, and you might laugh at it; ... it's just another aspect of humour, just because it's sex doesn't make it any more taboo or any more funny ... any more anyway ..." (L6,85)

Already, then, there is the notion that the 'smut' has to be exploited in the right way for it to be amusing. For one respondent,

"... if the humour has been a bit sophisticated and then suddenly joke is dropped in, like bodily function or whatever, it is funny just for the ... contrast of what's gone before, the sheer unexpectedness ..." (L17,28)

This is similar to another respondent's view of Monty Python rudeness:

"... they like to set up their upper-class, ... army types ... who then swear or ... (?) bottoms or whatever it is, then you get the cheap laugh of it, ..." (L12,116)



The viewing/reception context is also a factor in whether 'smut' 'works' or not. While it "depends of the individual"(L21,44), it also

"... depends who you're actually watching the material with, if you're viewing it in a group of, ... half a dozen male people, ... possible you can see the material different ..."(L21,41)

Another respondent implied much the same thing:

"... I liked it a lot better this time than when I first saw it in a cinema, ... because I went with someone who really didn't like it and objected to its (crudity), and I picked up on that ..."(L13,64)

More often however, the respondents were either silent or critical about the funniness of smut. One respondent was uneasy:

"... it's very strange, because I don't find that sequence very very funny, it make me laugh inside .../... if you see it, you know in a big cinema and the audience doesn't respond very much, you can start to feel embarrassed, I can (have) this feeling ..."(L16,66)

Denial of the comedic effectiveness of smut was occasionally accompanied - we have observed this 'displacement' in the sections above (pp.345-359) on violent, sexual and excremental humour - by an emphasis on the factor (performance or incongruity, for example) which 'explained' why the respondent laughed. Thus, asked whether it was possible to laugh at smut on its own, at the mention of 'penis' at the start of the Penis Song, one person replied

"... no, no, it's got to, ... like Eric Idle and his Noel Coward ... because you know that Noel Coward would never sing about things like that, that it makes it funny ..."(H13,53)

It may well be significant, though, that this respondent remained noticeably mirthful throughout this part of the discussion, and laughed most volubly at his own contrast between "... Noel Coward's

voice and a song about dicks!"(H13,54). Another comment about the same scene was

"... part of it would be ... the character that you recognize, that you don't hear in that situation, doing that; ..." (L6)

"... I think most of the humour is over the audience's reaction 'Oh, what a witty song' ..." (L23) (88)

There was also quite a variety of reaction to 'rude' language and swearing. Outside Monty Python, one respondent remembered an older example:

"... that song with Flanders and Swann, with the rude words in it, you know "pee-po, belly-bum draws" ... and they'd sing ... no, no this was years ago ..." (L14,95)

Three sessions included some discussion of Derek and Clive.<sup>37</sup> One respondent remembered that

"... I used to find everything funny and they do ... a lot of sketches about cancer and they really are quite horrific, ... but I used to, ... I found it hysterically funny ..." (H5,17-18)

"... the swearing and everything I found ... hysterically funny, I could spend just hours just killing myself laughing, just because there it was like one swearword after another, but now I mean a couple of years later or whatever, unless it's just me that's changed ... it's almost ... swearing isn't funny any more ..." (H5,19)

Though 'growing up' is clearly a factor here, this does contrast nicely with her partner's observation that

"... I've never found that as funny ... as Monty Python ... I've always found it a bit sort of gratuitous of swearing and all sorts of things ..." (H7,19)

Another respondent used the familiar device of ignoring/bypassing the language of Derek and Clive and stressed other reasons for his enjoyment:

"... the humour in it, for me, wasn't the sexual aspect, it was other things; the only sketch I can remember is, they're two football supporters saying 'Do you know I saw Nobby the other day and he called me a fucking cunt' 'No! Fucking cunt! So what did you do?' 'Oh I called him a fucking

cunt!' 'Quite right ...' ... all that showed was like the impoverishment of language when people just say that the whole time ... I don't think it's the sort of sexual aspect that's coming out there ..."(L23,87)

Returning to Meaning of Life, the respondent who had once found Derek and Clive so funny did not find the "couldn't you have your balls cut off?" line in the Sperm Song sequence funny, but did enjoy the reference to 'vaginal juices' in the sex-education lesson:

"... the one about the vaginal juices, that made me laugh, but I think that's because it was John Cleese saying it ..."(H5,10)

There were other positive responses to the 'rude' language in Monty Python. Thus, speaking of the TV programmes, one respondent

"... just thought that it was ... quite exciting ... it was naughty ..."(L5)

"... what because of the ... explicit language ..."(L12)

"... yes, ... it was quite a grown-up humour ..."(L5)  
(112-113)

"... there's this sense in which Monty Python is sending up that aspect; it says 'penis' and 'fuck'; it's not saying it in the spirit with which some of the people who say it find it funny ..."(L22,87)

Referring to Meaning of Life, another person spoke of Mr. Creosote:

"... the fact that he's so obnoxious, and the swearing's actually funny ..."(H5,9)

A few respondents, on the other hand, were not so impressed.

"... the scene with sex, ... the use of actual language was a bit heavy-handed, a bit explicit, to make the actual ... the actual sex sort of um comic ..."(L21,37)

"... remember the point we were making about rude words ... I didn't mean that there wasn't some value in it but I think some people deliberately use that, just to shock, they say look, I'm being terribly avant-garde, I'm using ..."(L14,115)

Both 'avant-garde language' and visual images can be invested with 'shock-value'.<sup>38</sup> To what extent can funniness depend on shock-value?

The effectiveness of an element of shock in Meaning of Life was evoked and recognized by several respondents.

"... with the leg, with this ... that was raw meat ... at first I was shocked, I thought 'oargh' really"(H1,5)

"... talking about vaginal juices ... I think there's a shock impact ..."(H11,54)

Speaking of the sex-education lesson, one respondent felt that

"... they actually achieved a genuine shocking capacity somehow in that ..."(L13,66)

Another referred to

"... the impact or the shock of the idea that if you've got a kidney card then someone's going to come and take your kidneys ..."(L23,80)

Referring to the same sequence, another response was

"... I can think of lots of people who would just be ... it's very difficult because in a sense if the film's justification is to shock, ... perhaps they're the people on whom it works most effectively ..."(L13,71)

Some associated shock with the 'new', the 'unexpected' (cf. pp.320-321 above). Asked why she laughed so much at the sex-education lesson, one respondent replied

"... I wouldn't have expected ... that you could say something like that on television or in a film ... leave alone in a classroom ..."(H1,2)

Similarly,

"... you don't expect that to be said at that point ... it comes out very very suddenly and very very surprisingly ..."(H13,57)

In a debate about Ben Elton's ideological purity, two respondents made much the same point:

"... I'd like to think I was shocked because I wasn't expecting even Ben Elton to do it here, on television ..." (L5,93)

"... there's a shock element of menstruation, periods being mentioned for the first time by Ben Elton ... on a live programme ..." (L12,104)

For some respondents shock-value had always been an essential component of Monty Python. One regretted the fact that 'shocking' material had been appropriated, had become commonplace:

"... they set the whole thing off, really ... and therefore now you've had all what's come since, and recently there's like The Young Ones ... Filthy Rich and Catflap, that sort of thing, therefore ... when you go back to this sort of humour it doesn't have the shock-value it had originally ..." (L12,94)

Some diagnosed in more recent Monty Python films an increased and more deliberate aim to shock.

"... they've now gone all out it appears to shock a large number of the ... audience ..." (H11,52)

"... trying to kind of excuse themselves by making that statement about "let's have lots of pictures of penises so we can get the shock-value", ... kind of incorporate what may well have been their strategy, in a way ... into the film ..." (L13,70)

Another saw the increased will to shock as natural/inevitable.

"... I think they've always, ... tried to shock ... or surprise, or whatever ... I suppose it's inevitable that ... organs are ripped out and people explode because otherwise, ... it's a progression of ideas, you've got to, otherwise people, ... are no longer going to be surprised or shocked ..." (H13,53)

Only three respondents, however, explicitly addressed the link between shock and laughter, the fact that shock can produce enjoyment.

"... I think it's that shock thing as well, isn't it 'cos you say, ... he just sort of ... pukes up everywhere, and ... you're quite shocked ... I don't know if you're embarrassed 'cos you think oh, he's being sick, and you immediately laugh, like a sort of an embarrassed laugh almost ... and

then you do begin to find it funny, but the first reaction you sort of think oh, I better laugh ..."(H5,18)

One respondent had seen the Sperm Song on TV as part of a review:

"... I realized I'd seen it reviewed on Barry Norman's Film eighty-whatever, ... I remember watching it ... laughing at that, but ... again it's the shock factor ..."(L12,93)

Of the Mr. Creosote sequence, another said simply

"... well, you laugh because you're shocked ..."(L14,92)

On the whole, then, the respondents seem to have been fairly sceptical about the possibility of smut being inherently funny. They also generally recognized the presence of shock-value in Meaning of Life while, for the most part, denying its funniness.

The central problem of whether a shock-effect can be effected by repeated use of the same kind of material was raised by one respondent:

"... the idea of the shockingness of certain subject-matter ... this has always been around, that if they depend on the shockingness of the certain subject matter, ... once it's been expressed, once someone's dared to say it, that's taken away all the value; if that's all they're depending on ..."(L14,95)

"... if that is what is supposed to be funny, the sheer shock-value, of saying something that's not normally said on television, I think, you know, it's bound to diminish each time it's used ... if that is the pure reason ..."(L14,96)

We are back now in the realm of repetition (cf. pp.330-331 & 335-339 above), of the cotton-reel that keeps coming back, of our old friend the unconscious.

f) Psychoanalysis: repression and catharsis

It became axiomatic in Sections 1-5 of this thesis that where sexual/excremental comedic material is found to be funny, the amusement represents a cathartic release of libidinal energy. This energy is habitually (uneconomically) blocked off by a particular individual's system of repressions. Moreover, since laughter at a sexually tendentious joke releases a quota of repressed energy but does nothing about the (sexual) anxieties which keep the repression in place, there seems no reason (other than a desire for 'novelty') why the repeated use of the same or similar material should not continue to provide a measure of cathartic release. How did the comments made by the respondents tally with such a model? The material which follows will overlap with, but hopefully also dig a little deeper than, the earlier subsection on 'uncomfortable material, release and inhibition' (pp.308-311 above). There will also be a link forward with the analysis of some of the questionnaire items and the HAT sheets below. It will be as well to repeat one last time that it cannot be a question of 'psychoanalysing' the respondents!

We can recall some instances of respondents' references to the laughter of shock or horror.

"... well, you laugh because you're shocked ..." (L14,92)

"... it was laughing at the horror, it was the horrific ..." (L12,92)

"... yes, but it's revolting at the same time ..." (L12)

"... I think ... it is a defensive type of laughter ..." (L14)  
(93)

"... a lot of laughter in that was a kind of defensive exorcism kind of laughter ... and certainly when you start talking about things like, ... Chainsaw Massacre, ... the laughter is a response ... that prevents you, you know exorcises fear ..." (L13,75)

Bearing in mind the above distinction (cf. footnote 359) with regard to shock, we may note at length one respondent's notable insistence on not being shocked (by Meaning of Life); at the same time he was bemused about why this should be so:

"... it makes me laugh inside, you know it doesn't shock me, but, I don't feel like laughing like some other parts of the film ... I don't know, I just can't ... it doesn't shock me at all .../... if you see it, ... in a big cinema and the audience doesn't respond very much, you can start to feel embarrassed ..." (L16,66)

"... no, I just can't explain it because really it should shock me but ... that enormous person coming inside the restaurant, ... it was a shock when I (saw) it the first time, I didn't know where they wanted to go, and I said OK it's, John Cleese, French waiter, all the clichés ... all right ... and after, ... the way for example you see that woman, she's cleaning and she receives everything on her back ... I don't know, I can't explain why it makes me laugh, I've no idea really ..." (L16,69)

"... I laugh, I will laugh but, I do appreciate the ... I don't know, it's difficult to explain why it doesn't shock me ..." (L16,72-73)

"... that scene in the restaurant, you would start to be, you would walk out, or you would be disgusted, and you should be disgusted ... there is nothing more ..." (L16,75)

Despite the apparently unconscious repetition of the "I know I should be shocked" motif, this particular respondent did show some awareness that laughter could be a means of coping with embarrassment and with the horrific:

"... at one moment you don't know if you have to laugh or not, and suddenly, ... you have to laugh because if you don't laugh, either you are frightened or ... you leave ..." (L16,74)

Though certainly not clearly articulated, this respondent's comments did at least show an appreciation of the ludic effectiveness of the



grotesque/tendentious sections of Meaning of Life. The same appreciation was lacking in some other responses:

"... that sort of gore overwhelms any humour in it ... I find all the spurting tomato ketchup gets a bit overwhelming ..."(L23,80)

"... I found the ... overwhelming tenor of the gore and the puking and so on, ... overwhelmed by it ..."(L23,81)

"... idea of people becoming covered in vomit just didn't get to me at all ..."(L23,83)

Another person in the same group said of the Live Organ Transplant sequence:

"... much as I quite often tend to laugh at those things, I didn't for that one ..." (L6,83)

Our most 'distanced' respondent again provided conflicting answers. On the one hand, he was fairly confident that

"... I've seen the film before ... also I'm slightly more hardened to ... the more provocative material"(L21,42)

On the other hand, he immediately went on to admit that

"... I'm more sort of repulsed by the imagery ... I feel it could be my insecurity ..."(L21,42)

This was already a reprise of an earlier exchange on the same subject (cf. pg.347 above). The same respondent also proposed, challengingly, that

"... in the past I don't think I've ever experienced (release through comedy) ..."(L21,42)

A more common type of response, however, reflected the combination of repulsion and (involuntary) amusement. Thus one respondent

"(didn't) like a lot of blood spilling about ... right over the top, wasn't it ... but I still thought it was funny ..."(H11,49)

In this and one or two other cases no psychological or psychoanalytic model was articulated. One respondent in particular was

strikingly 'innocent' about his enjoyment of excremental and sexual humour. A number of his comments were punctuated by laughter as he recalled - and embroidered - favourite moments from the film:

"... every time he pukes into the bucket, you still laugh, ... it's very very strange, why you do ... (laughter)"(H13,50)

Indeed there were points (e.g. Appendix 4 pg. 54) where he was struggling to contain his mirth when someone else was talking about a particular sketch.

Some respondents, however, did (frequently without prompting!) produce tentative speculations about what underlay the enjoyment.

"... probably like the times you laugh and there's really a deep-rooted reason ... somebody had to probably work out with you what it is, ... like you were saying about Mr. Creosote sketch, perhaps it is something deeper that just ..." (H5,18)

Speaking of his enjoyment of a Young Ones episode in which the others play football with Vivian's severed head, one person said he had

"... rolled around laughing ... it's not as gruesome as some of this ... but that's kind of completely unmotivated ... I don't know, I've got very dubious unconscious motives ... (for liking that) ..." (L13,79)

Laughter as defence and as relief tended to merge for some respondents. Thus one described how he tends to

"... look for thing that are funny, ... perhaps unfortunate situations, ... maybe it is for that reason though, as well, so I don't ... hurt myself ..." (H7,16)

and shortly afterwards added

"... everybody hates being sick themselves, that it's just ... a kind of strange sort of relief, I suppose ..." (H7,18)

This respondent's partner seemed to be clearer about the 'release' function:

"... you want to laugh all of a sudden, because it had ... probably shocked you a bit and you ... laugh anyway as a release ..." (H5,12)

Another respondent summed up quite succinctly the 'repressed' and 'non-repressed' modes of enjoyment of Monty Python humour.

"... I always had a feeling that Monty Python was somehow split into two camps, those people who were somehow very repressed, ... kind of enjoyed seeing what was repressed acted out, and those people who, at the other end of the scale, somehow lived and talked about Monty Python anyway, also enjoyed it, who weren't necessarily repressed ..." (L10,30)

In fact this kind of polarization sits awkwardly with the kind of semi-quantitative amusement-repression relation suggested by some of the experimental literature and summarized above; (cf. pp.188-190 & 198-199 including Figs. 2 and 3) the quantitative relation postulated there between amusement at tendentious comedic elements and strength of repression is an inverted U-shaped curve, with maximum average amusement occurring at moderate levels of repression. Would it be psycho-economically viable for those at the extremes of repression and non-repression to release (repressed) psychic energy through laughter in such an instance? For the very repressed individual the high degree of potential would not be worth the risk of the eruption of very deep-seated excremental or other anxieties; for the unrepressed person there would be little appreciation at stake anyway. It may, on the other hand, be that both ends of L10's polarization lie well towards the middle of the appreciation-repression curve, in which case both groups of Monty Python 'fans' would indeed record high levels of appreciation. After all, it is arguable that the scale of repression employed in the kind of common parlance reported here would exclude the extremes at both ends.

Nevertheless, repression was thus put on the agenda. Another respondent was, as we have seen, extremely careful to distance his own reaction from that of the 'typical' Monty Python fan:

"... I don't think for a majority of the real audience, particularly if they're not a Monty Python fan, 'cos a Monty Python, even if they're repulsed by imagery like that, in other films, will probably appreciate it, because they know what to expect from Monty Python material, but ... for a majority of the audience, and for someone who doesn't appreciate Monty Python to such an extent, ... they would actually have shut themselves off from that scene ..." (L21,38)

"... I wouldn't class myself as a Monty Python fan, but what I would class as a typical Monty Python fan, I would see as being different to myself ... the typical Monty Python fan ... he would enjoy sort of alternative humour, ... which is a sort of label term ... possibly rebellious against society ... possibly someone who ... has restricted themselves, restricted their emotion, and can find outlets through the kind of humour that Monty Python depicts ..." (L21,39)

With one particular group I became involved in a discussion of Freudian theory. As one of the group agreed,

"... there is a kind of ... psychological cathartic release, ... as you say not being able to say directly what you'd like to say, and therefore it's kind of disguised, and ... displaces ..." (L12,110)

There was very little debate about the effectiveness of repetition of explicitly tendentious material. In the group which did take up the question, one respondent began by denying the effectiveness of repeated shock:

"... if they depend on the shockingness of the certain subject matter, sure, once it's been expressed, once someone's dared to say it, that's taken away all the value; if that's all they're depending on; ..." (L14,95-96)

"... it's bound to diminish each time it's used ... if that is the pure reason ..." (L14,96)

When I later pointed to the persistence of unconscious anxieties, however, the same respondent joined with another in agreeing that

"Oh I think that's true ..." (L14)

"... and so, maybe we need to, there's a sort of safety-valve which ..."(Q)

"Yes, ... in terms of fart-type jokes, or that sort of thing, people still laugh at them ..."(L12)

"... the whoopee-cushion was the ultimate fart joke, wasn't it ..."(L14)

"... the whoopee-cushion is the ultimate thing for kids, ... and for adults alike, you know people still find it funny; whether it's an area that people still feel embarrassed about and therefore they need that release periodically ..."  
(laughter) (L12) (104)

This happy turn of phrase was greeted with suitably appreciative laughter from all present.

#### 6.6 The Humour Appreciation Test

At this stage we shall deal with comments made by some respondents about the measurement of 'funniness'. The answers to one particular questionnaire item concerned with reasons for liking Monty Python will then be used to supplement the HAT findings in relation to the 'repression-thesis' developed at various points above, particularly in sections 2 and 4.

Two respondents raised the general problem of measurement of the comedic.

"... how do you measure, I mean maybe that was funny, we laughed a lot, but to measure the humour of laughter, ..."(L5,92)

"... I don't know how you measure humour ... that's a very hard thing, to actually ring a number on that anyway, ... it's ... hard to recognize in yourself what you particularly find funny; we don't tend to stop and analyze humour ..."(L12,92)

The question of "is this funny?" was also considered by another respondent:

"... I kept asking myself, is this funny? ... interesting to see the difference between 'is this funny?' and 'is this amusing' or entertaining ..." (L10,32)

While this distinction has been looked at above (cf. pg.311), and notions of pleasure, funniness and entertainment certainly need to be separated out, the difference between 'funniness' and 'amusement' had to remain more obscure (cf. pp.173-174 above).

More pertinently to the HAT format actually used, a number of respondents identified various ways in which it was difficult to award scores for individual sections which were not influenced in some way by response to some other part of the film. Thus one person felt that

"... your mood can be altered by what you've seen before, because you might be a bit more receptive ... if you really enjoyed the beginning, it might sort of draw you in more ..." (L6,80)

Two others described how their assessments were consciously based on a comparison with previous sections of the film:

"... I kept thinking, am I enjoying this one more or less than the other one that I think I'll probably give the same mark to ..." (L17,32)

"... you can actually say as you go through the film, I found that bit funnier than the bit I saw before, but I put '2' for that and I don't think it's unfunny so I've got to put '2' again ..." (L6)

The reported generosity in another case must have been subject to a similar 'contagion':

"... the only one I found extremely funny was the man exploding, ... that was great ... and some, I've been quite generous ... like the first one I didn't find all that funny, but I've put down a '3' ..." (H13,47)

though the enhanced mark for the first section would also have been due to a particular susceptibility on the part of this specific

respondent. One is reminded here of two of the factors identified by Freud as influencing responsiveness to the comedic:

"a generally cheerful mood, including toxic states ... (etc.)"

"expectation of the comedic, increased susceptibility to relatively low levels of stimulation ... (etc.)"<sup>39</sup>

Only one respondent pinpointed a problem which, if the lack of comment is to be believed, was not as troublesome as I had anticipated. Though the carving of Meaning of Life into sections for HAT purposes had been done with a view to concentrating on one particular type of comedicity in each section, it was nevertheless evident that at least in the latter sections there was a comedic heterogeneity which may have made it difficult to award a simple 'funniness' score. Thus

"... there'd be a particularly absurd moment that'd have me rolling about ... then ... there'd be a stretch that was relatively, I thought was really boring, I found it hard to decide how I should express my reactions, as a total ..."(L13,67)

As we have noted already in passing, the questionnaire material did not prove to be as useful as had been hoped. No sustained use has as yet been made of the biographical data furnished in Fig.7 above and in Appendix 1.

One questionnaire item however, proved very interesting. Question no.36 asked respondents who had previously indicated a liking for Monty Python material to further indicate which given elements of Monty Python humour contributed most to their appreciation. The six elements proposed were irreverence, sexual/ excremental content, animation, visual violence/aggression, absurdity/nonsense, and

performance/acting. A space for other reasons was provided, but in fact very few alternatives were suggested.

Respondents were asked to number the elements 'in order of importance'. Of the 31 respondents who returned questionnaires, five had omitted to answer the question, in most cases because they expressed neither like nor dislike for Monty Python. A further 10 had simply ticked one or more of the suggested elements; since the number of items ticked varies between one and four, effective comparison would appear very difficult, though a simple count of how many times each element had been ticked gives striking results! (cf. Fig.8)

Most interestingly, the listings in order of importance by the remaining 16 questionnaire respondents lent themselves to a very simple exercise. A total of the priority-scores given for each of the comedic factors/elements would give a more or less clear indication of those factors seen (by our respondents) as most (and least) important in their appreciation of Monty Python. This exercise is carried out in Fig.9.

Absurdity/nonsense and irreverence clearly emerge as the factors agreed to be most important, with a striking unanimity apparent particularly among the (provincial) Hemel Hempstead (H) responses. Performance comes out somewhere in the middle, and the animation seems to have scored rather badly. It is perhaps noteworthy, however, - the significance of this will be discussed below - that the sexual/excremental and violent aspects of Monty Python humour were not deemed important factors in the enjoyment of the material



irreverence. . . . .	6
sexual/excremental . . . . .	0
animation. . . . .	5
visual violence/aggression . . .	1
absurdity/nonsense . . . . .	9
performance/acting . . . . .	6

Fig.8 Total number of ticks awarded for each Monty Python amusement-factor listed in questionnaire item no.36 by those respondents who did not place the factors in rank order.

	irreverence	sexual/ excremental	animation	'violence'	absurd/ nonsense	performance
H1	1½	4	6	5	1½	3
H5	2	6	3	5	1	4
H7	2	6	4	5	1	3
H8	3	5	4	6	1	2
H9	2	5	6	3	1	4
H11	2	6	4	5	1	3
H12	2	3	5	6	1	4
H13	2	5	4	3	1	6
L2	1	5½	4	5½	2	3
L3	2	5	5	3	1	5
L6	1	2	6	3	4	5
L9	2	6	4	5	1	3
L12	2	5	4	6	1	3
L13	1	6	5	3	2	4
L16	2	5	6	4	1	3
L22	3	6	4	5	1	2
TOTAL	30½	80½	74	72½	21½	57

Fig.9 Modified preference scores<sup>40</sup> for those respondents who placed some or all listed factors in order of preference, from most important factor in appreciation of Monty Python (=1) to least important (=6). (Questionnaire item no.36)

by a large majority of these respondents. (This no doubt also helps to explain the low 'animation' score. Gilliam's Monty Python animations have frequently been of a marked grotesque and 'violent' nature. (cf. also pp.150-151 above)). The 'rank order' is moreover almost exactly reproduced in the tabulation (Fig.8) of ticks awarded in a non-ranking exercise by some other respondents. The absurd/

nonsensical was again clearly the major factor, with the violent and sexual/excremental gaining only one tick between the two categories.

The question is: are sexual/excremental/tendentious comedic elements really insignificant in deciding what material is appreciated, or is there a pressure for the importance of such factors to remain secret and unacknowledged? After all, if anxieties relating to tendentious material are repressed, how likely is a questionnaire item to breach the defences of that repression?

Humour Ratings Sheets / Humour Appreciation Tests (HATs) were completed by 18 respondents, 16 of whom took part in the interview sessions. The results of the HATs are summarised in Fig.10.

	HAT 1	HAT 2	HAT 3	HAT 4	HAT 5	HAT 6	Q36	interview	average of 6 scores
H1	5	6½	4	4	5	4	✓	✓	4.75
H2	1	4	3	3	3	3			2.8
H5	5	7	5	6	7	7	✓	✓	6.2
H7	4	5	5	6	7	6	✓	✓	5.5
H11	4	5	6	4	7	4	✓	✓	5.0
H12	3	5	4	4	7	4	✓		4.5
H13	5	7	7	6	6	6		✓	6.2
L5	2	5	4	5½	7	5		✓	4.75
L6	3	5	2	2	5	2	✓	✓	3.2
L10	4	7	6	4	5	3		✓	4.8
L12	2	6	5	5	6	5	✓	✓	4.8
L13	5	5	3	4	4	5	✓	✓	4.3
L14	6	7	5	6	5	5		✓	5.7
L16	7	6	6	6	7	5	✓	✓	6.2
L17	1	6	5	3	2	2		✓	3.2
L21	6	3	5	4	6	-		✓	4.8
L22	6	5	3	4	5	5	✓	✓	4.7
L23	3	5	3	1	1	2		✓	2.5
TOTAL	72	97.5	81	77.5	95	73			
AVERAGE	4.0	5.4	4.5	4.3	5.3	4.3			4.6

Fig.10 Summary of Humour Ratings Sheet responses

Section 1, the Crimson Permanent Assurance film, obtained the lowest average humour appreciation rating. The humour in this section was clearly of a whimsical, gentle kind, with 'violence' of a very 'reasonable' nature. Many respondents commented in discussion about their enjoyment of this section, and about how this enjoyment was not the same as finding the episode 'funny'.

Section 2 was deliberately selected as that part of the film containing most 'sexual' humour. This section not only elicited the highest average humour appreciation rating, but was also very visibly/audibly enjoyed by most respondents, particularly in comparison with the first HAT section.

Sections 3 and 4 contained the most 'violent' material in the film; both sections received moderate humour appreciation scores. The second of these sections also included the absurd/dadaist Middle of the Film, which some respondents reported enjoying, while others were quite bemused. The particular combination of the absurdity of the Middle of the Film and the grotesque visceral violence of the Live Organ Transplants sequence no doubt gave rise to some difficulties in completing the ratings sheets. The two parts of this section would, in retrospect, probably have been better treated as two separate sections, especially in view of the high appreciation of absurdity/nonsense as a vital ingredient of Monty Python reported by many of the respondents (cf. Fig.9 above).

Section 5, The Autumn Years, was dominated by the exploding Mr. Creosote, and was accorded a high average humour appreciation rating only just below that for section 2. While this section was deliber-

ately selected within the HAT structure as an instance of excremental/grotesque humour, it is interesting that a number of the respondents identified as their primary sources of pleasure other elements such as performance, exaggeration, exposure of hypocrisy/ gluttony etc. Again the question of whether the respondents could really be expected to admit to the excremental as a fertile sense of humour is a vexed one.

Finally Section 6 and 'Death' was scored only moderately, a number of respondents feeling that the end of the film lacked originality and/or structure. This was underlined by the relative lack of laughter which generally accompanied the final part of the film, particularly in contrast to the excesses of Section 5.

Ten respondents who took part in the interview sessions had also provided rank-order responses to item 36 in the questionnaire. We are now in a position to indulge in a little speculation about how these two sets of data (Figs.9 and 10) fit together, and to some extent also about the HAT profiles provided by the 8 respondents who had not given rank-order replies to item 36.

The most striking and indeed exciting correlation between the two sets of data is that sexual/excremental humour was judged to be the least important factor determining appreciation of Monty Python, while HAT sections 2 and 5 - parts of the film containing the Sperm Song, the sex-education lesson, the Penis Song and the exploding Mr. Creosote - were seen as considerably funnier than the other sections.

How well does a classical-repression thesis account for this apparently complete inversion of reported preferences? It may be useful to construct a heuristic typology to describe how the individual respondents seemed to fit with a classical-repression model. It will be necessary to override for the time being the claims of some of the respondents that their enjoyment of Mr. Creosote, for example, was due more to factors such as performance and satire than to excremental/bodily anxieties. While accepting that such links would augment or modify enjoyment, we may, polemically, remind ourselves of two propositions which we have already encountered:

"The funniness provided by tendentious content is inversely related to the audience's awareness of its presence and nature."<sup>41</sup>

"Freudians may argue, from a theoretical rather than an empirical base, that everyone represses their instinctual nature to some degree."<sup>42</sup>

(i) Classical repression

Nine of the eighteen respondents who completed HAT ratings sheets may be argued to inhabit this category, with appreciation scores for HAT sections 2 and 5 high, but with sexual/excremental (and probably 'violent') given low priority in questionnaire item 36. A tenth respondent is included by default.

Good examples here are H1, H5, H11 and L12. The latter of these respondents also commented in the questionnaire about her preference for subtlety, and included 'witty' under 'other' factors in item 36, yet sections 2 and 5 were her highest HAT scores.

Another fairly clear instance is provided by L5. This respondent did not put the factors in Q36 in rank order, but did tick two factors other than 'sexual/excremental' and 'violent'. He scored '7' for the more excremental section 5, and '5' for section 2.

Two other respondents may belong in this box, though their HAT scores are rather less conclusive. In the case of L22, HAT scores for sections 2 and 5 were above the average appreciation score given by that respondent to the film, but not very noticeably so. L13's HAT scores were too uniform to be particularly significant, though Section 2 did get the equal highest HAT score.

The case of two other subjects is more difficult. H13 placed 'visual violence/aggression' at no.3 in item 36, and 'sexual/excremental' at no.5. This respondent confirmed during the discussion that he appreciated aggressive/cruel humour. He also laughed a great deal during the interview session, most particularly significantly during our discussion of sexual humour. His HAT scores were uniformly high, with section 2 equal top. L16, though less of a laugher, presents a similar profile, though without the express liking for cruel/aggressive humour. Again the HAT scores were high, with section 5 equal top. With this respondent also the discussion provides significant clues; most noticeably a refrain of

"... I know I should be shocked ... I can't explain why ...  
I'm not ..." (cf. pg.380 above)

Finally, one subject, L10, cannot really be placed, since though HAT sections 2 and 5 scored '7' and '5' respectively, there is little else to go on. The respondent expressed a dislike for gross

exaggeration in discussion, but there is no entry for questionnaire item 36.

(ii) Relative lack of repression?

Three respondents will be included in this subsection. This is, again, an indication of a particular kind of correlation in their Q36/HAT results, not, of course, a psychoanalytic diagnosis!

Two of these respondents, H12 and L6, scored 'sexual/ excremental' high on their list of factors important in Monty Python comedy. In the case of the first of these, the respondent was French, so a relative unfamiliarity with the Monty Python team may have pushed down the 'performance' rating. Still, the partial avowal of pleasure in sexual/excremental humour was well reflected in high HAT scores for sections 2 and 5. The second of these two respondents scored irreverence as most important in Q36, with 'sexual/excremental' second, and 'visual violence/aggression' third. This respondent duly gave low HAT scores (2 or 3) to all sections of the film except sections 2 and 5.

The scores for a third respondent also seemed to correlate in a non-repressed way. H2 identified herself as "definitely not a Monty Python fan" and cited absurdity/nonsense and the violent as the factors she most disliked. This would indicate that she would have placed the sexual/excremental not lower than 4th in a rank order, a higher position than the average 5th. This respondent's HAT scores were predictably low, with the exception of that for section 2.

(iii) Discrepant sexual and excremental Humour appreciation rating

While in the instances already considered there must of course have been a distinction to be made between the sexual and the excremental, it appeared, given the nature of the research data,<sup>43</sup> that more could perhaps be inferred about an overall situation of repressedness. In the remaining 5 cases it seemed that there was significant evidence for a distinction between the sexual and the excremental to be made.

Three of these respondents indicated a marked preference for HAT section 2 as compared with section 5. L14, who had ticked all entries in Q36 except 'sexual/excremental' and 'visual violence/aggression', scored a '7' for the more 'sexual' HAT section 2, and her equal lowest score, '5', for section 5. Even more striking were the HAT ratings for L17 and L23, neither of whom had answered Q36. L17 recorded a '6' for HAT section 2 and '2' (only slightly funny) for section 5, while for L23 the scores were '5' and '1' respectively - the latter respondent also gave a '1' to the section containing the Live Organ Transplants sequence. Both these respondents also expressed during discussion a dislike for the excessive vomiting, gore etc. of some sequences. It would clearly be possible, within the parameters of a Freudian repression model, to speculate about why, for these respondents, the excremental may have given rise to anxieties which the 'joke-work' was unable to overcome.



The reverse appeared to be the case for the remaining two respondents. One of these, H7, would perhaps also fit the 'classical repressions' description, but indicated during discussion that he had found overtly sexual material (such as that in Derek and Clive) unfunny; this is to some extent reflected in his HAT ratings. While scoring fairly generously throughout, he scored '7' for HAT section 5, and his second lowest mark was a '5' for section 2. Finally, the youngest respondent, L21, was very markedly alone in giving his lowest appreciation score, '3', to HAT section 2, while his equal highest mark went to section 5. This was the respondent whose activities include collecting medals, records and horror-film material, and who showed a marked categorising/rationalist tendency in a number of his comments.

If it is difficult to go very far with the individual questionnaire and HAT profiles, one thing at least is clear. While it is possible to argue that the relation between the HAT ratings totals for sections 2 and 5 and the non-preference for sexual/excremental humour expressed in Q36 supports a broadly Freudian repression-thesis, this is certainly not to say that each individual respondent conforms unproblematically to the repression-model. Though we have tried to indicate how some of the respondents at least fit into such a model, others clearly do not. Our findings/remarks on this must perforce remain tentative.

#### 6.7 The Mood-Adjective Check-Lists (MACLs)

The pre- and post-film MACL responses were collated on a summary sheet to show the shifts which each respondent had recorded for each

of the 100 words. (Fig.11). The total and average unit changes for each word could then be computed. Fig.12 shows the distribution of the words according to the total net shift each word had been subjected to, together with the number of respondents who had recorded a change in their response to each word.

Thirty-two words were then selected for closer analysis; nineteen of these were those corresponding to Nowlis and Green's original 'anxiety' cluster.<sup>44</sup> Total and average shifts for these adjectives are summarised in Fig.13.

A number of significant observations can be made about the MACL findings. The first thing to note is a marked downward trend in the responses recorded before and after Meaning of Life; this is graphically reflected in the shape of Fig.12. For the great majority of the words chosen for the lists, lower scores were recorded after the film than before. Thus 47 words suffered an overall downward shift of two or more units, whereas 16 scored two or more units higher after the film than before.

Secondly, there was also a noticeable downward shift in many of the 19 Nowlis and Green 'anxiety' words (indicated by the prefix \*NG in Fig.11). The words 'frustrated', 'tense', 'nervous', 'on edge', 'worried', 'afraid' and 'insecure' were all marked down by an overall four units or more, whereas only 'startled' was marked up to a comparable degree. Indeed only two of the 19 Nowlis and Green words - 'fearful' and 'startled' - obtained an overall increased score.

Fig.11 MACL Summary Sheet

T=17

		net																				resps	
		unit																				total total resps registering	
		change																				up down change	
		L1 L2 H5 H7 H11 H12 H13 L5 L6 L10 L12 L13 L14 L16 L17 L21 L22 L23																					
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Fig.11 (continued)

	net																resps							
	unit																total total resps							
	H1	H2	H5	H7	H11	H12	H13	L5	L6	L10	L12	L13	L14	L16	L17	L21	L22	L23	change	↑	↓	up	down	change
fed up		↑																	-1	1	2	1	1	2
forgiving		↓	↓		↓	↓	↑↑↑		↑	↑↑	↑	↓	↑						-	8	8	5	5	10
frightened																			-1	0	1	0	1	1
*NG frustrated		↑		↑			↓	↓			↓	↓	↓				↑		-9	1	10	1	5	6
full of pity	↑										↑	↑	↑						+3	4	1	4	1	5
*NG helpless	↓										↓	↓	↓						-2	1	3	1	2	3
hungry				↑↑		↑↑		↑↑	↑↑		↑	↓	↓					↓	+4	4	0	2	0	2
* inactive			↑		↑↑	↑		↑	↑↑		↑	↓	↓		↑	↑↑			+7	11	4	7	3	10
in pain		↓						↓			↓	↓	↓		↑↑↑				-1	3	4	1	3	4
*NG insecure								↓			↓	↓	↓						-4	0	4	0	3	3
inspired	↑	↓	↓			↑↑	↓	↓	↓	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑		↑		↑		+2	11	9	7	6	13
interested		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑↑	↑↑								-9	0	9	0	7	7
intoxicated	↓		↑					↓			↑↑		↓		↓		↓		-	2	2	1	1	2
introspective			↑	↑	↑↑↑			↓		↓	↓	↓	↓				↓		-7	3	10	1	7	8
irritated		↑↑					↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓						-4	4	8	2	4	6
*NG jittery			↓		↑		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓						-3	1	4	1	3	4
kind	↓	↓	↓	↓			↓	↑	↑	↑↑	↑↑				↑		↑		-	7	7	5	4	9
leisurely	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓		↓	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓						-3	6	9	5	6	11
lustful	↑							↓	↑↑			↓							+1	3	2	2	2	4
meticulous	↓	↓	↓	↓				↑	↑				↓	↓					-4	1	5	1	4	5
miserable								↓			↓								-4	0	4	0	2	2
*NG nervous	↑							↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	↓			↓		-7	1	8	1	5	6
obedient	↓			↓				↓			↓	↓	↓					↑	-1	2	3	2	3	5
*NG on edge		↓					↓	↓				↓	↓	↓					-6	0	6	0	5	5
optimistic		↓	↓				↑		↓	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑		↓				-3	6	9	4	7	11
* overjoyed										↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑						+6	6	0	4	0	4
*NG panicky											↑↑	↑↑	↑						-	0	0	0	0	0
persuasive	↓			↓	↓	↓		↑	↓					↓	↓		↑		-5	2	7	2	7	9
playful			↓	↑		↑↑		↓	↓	↑↑							↑↑		+4	7	3	4	2	6
* pleased	↓			↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑					↓	+9	11	2	7	2	9
proud									↑↑		↑				↑				-	1	1	1	1	2
* quiet	↑			↑		↑↑	↓	↑↑	↑↑		↓	↓	↓		↑↑	↑↑			+5	11	6	5	5	10
* rebellious	↓						↓	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓		↑				-4	1	5	1	5	6

Fig.11 (continued)

	net																resps							
	unit																total total resps resps registering							
	change																change							
	H1	H2	H5	H7	H11	H12	H13	I5	I6	I10	I12	I13	I14	I16	I17	I21	I22	I23	↑	↓	up	down	change	
refreshed	↓↓	↓	↓↓↓		↑	↑	↑			↑↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↓			↓	+4	9	5	6	3	9
regretful					↓↓↓	↓↓↓	↓↓↓				↓	↓	↓	↓	↓↓				-10	0	10	0	6	6
sad										↓↓	↓↓	↑↑↑							-2	3	5	1	3	4
sarcastic	↑				↑	↑	↑				↓			↑	↓		↑	↓	-3	3	6	3	4	7
* satisfied		↓↓			↑	↓	↑	↓↓			↑↑						↓	↓	-2	5	7	3	5	8
sceptical	↑						↓↓	↓			↓		↓						-4	1	5	1	4	5
* secure	↓				↓↓			↑	↓	↑↑	↑	↑	↓	↓					-2	4	6	3	5	8
self-centred	↓	↓		↑	↓↓			↑↑	↑↑										-1	3	4	2	3	5
self-conscious						↓↓↓	↓↓↓		↓↓		↓						↑		-5	1	6	1	3	4
serious				↓			↓↓	↑↑	↑↑								↓↓		-3	3	6	2	4	6
*NG shaky																			-	0	0	0	0	0
*NG shocked								↓				↑							-	1	1	1	1	2
slow	↓↓		↑↑					↑↑	↑↑				↓	↑	↑			↓	+3	7	4	4	3	7
smug						↓													-1	1	2	1	2	3
sociable			↓↓		↓	↓↓							↑						-4	1	5	1	3	4
sorry	↓						↑↑↑			↓	↓	↓		↑				↓	-1	3	4	1	4	5
*NG startled	↑↑↑				↑↑							↓	↓	↑					+5	6	1	3	1	4
strong			↓↓	↑				↓↓		↑↑	↑↑	↑						↓	-1	4	5	3	3	6
stubborn	↓							↑	↑										-	1	1	1	1	2
subdued				↓				↑↑	↑↑		↓	↑						↓	-1	4	5	3	4	7
suspicious								↑	↑			↑					↓↓		-1	2	3	2	2	4
talkative	↑						↓↓		↓	↑↑	↑	↑							+2	5	3	4	2	6
*NG tense	↑	↑	↓				↓↓	↓↓	↓↓		↓	↓					↓		-8	1	9	1	6	7
*NG terrified									↓										-1	0	1	0	1	1
thirsty	↓↓		↑↑↑		↑↑		↓	↓↓	↓↓			↑↑							-	8	8	4	4	8
tired				↓↓			↑↑	↑	↑		↓	↓	↓		↑		↑		-	5	5	4	4	8
trustful	↓	↓		↓				↑	↑					↓↓					-7	2	9	2	6	8
* uncertain	↓	↓		↓				↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	↓			↓	↓	-10	0	10	0	8	8
*NG upset							↓↓				↓↓	↑↑							-2	2	4	1	2	3
vigorous					↓			↓↓			↑↑	↑	↑		↓↓		↑↑		+1	6	5	4	3	7
warm-hearted					↑			↓	↓	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↓		+6	9	3	7	3	10
wide-awake	↓↓			↑↑	↑			↓↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑↑		↓		+1	8	7	7	4	11
*NG worried		↓					↓↓			↓↓	↓↓	↓↓							-7	0	7	0	4	4

	NET MINUS			NET PLUS					
	-8/-10	-6/-7	-4/-5	-2/-3	-1 to +1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-10
apprehensive	6	concentrating	4	active	13	angry	4	accommodating	7
efficient	8	confident	9	afraid	2	annoyed	2	alert	8
frustrated	6	doubtful	7	attentive	9	careful	8	beligerent	4
interested	7	earnest	9	clear-thinking	6	depressed	3	bored	3
regretful	6	introspective	8	dissatisfied	4	desperate	1	calm	7
tense	7	nervous	6	dull	4	downhearted	3	carefree	8
uncertain	8	on edge	5	insecure	3	helpless	3	cheerful	9
		trustful	8	irritated	6	jittery	4	contemplative	10
		worried	4	meticulous	5	leisurely	11	detached	8
				miserable	2	optimistic	11	disinterested	3
				persuasive	9	sad	4	drowsy	8
				rebellious	6	sarcastic	7	egotistic	4
				sceptical	5	satisfied	8	enthusiastic	10
				self-conscious	4	secure	8	fed up	2
				sociable	4	serious	6	forgiving	10
					82	upset	3	frightened	1
								in pain	4
								intoxicated	2
								kind	9
								lustful	4
								obedient	5
								panicky	0
								proud	2
								self-centred	5
								shaky	0
								shocked	2
								smug	3
								sorry	5
								strong	6
								stubborn	2
								subdued	7
								suspicious	4
								terrified	1
								thirsty	8
								tired	8
								vigorous	7
								wide-awake	11
									197

anxiety/aggression cluster

other

FIG.12. NET MACL UNIT CHANGE FOR EACH WORD.  
THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO REGISTERED A  
CHANGE IS SHOWN AFTER EACH WORD

 anxiety/aggression cluster  
 other

FIG.12. NET MACL UNIT CHANGE FOR EACH WORD.  
THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO REGISTERED A  
CHANGE IS SHOWN AFTER EACH WORD

Fig.13 MACL shifts for 32 selected words.

Nowlis and Green 'anxiety' cluster (*NG in Fig.11)				
	respondents recording change	net change ↑↓	shift per respondent (over all respondents)	shift per respondent affected
afraid	2	-4	-0.24*	-2.00**
desperate	1	-3	-0.18	-3.00
downhearted	3	-3	-0.18	-1.00
fearful	2	+2	+0.12	+1.00
frightened	1	-1	-0.06	-1.00
frustrated	6	-9	-0.53	-1.50
helpless	3	-2	-0.12	-0.67
insecure	3	-4	-0.24	-1.33
jittery	4	-3	-0.18	-0.75
nervous	6	-7	-0.41	-1.17
on edge	5	-6	-0.35	-1.20
panicky	0	0	0.00	0.00
shaky	0	0	0.00	0.00
shocked	2	0	0.00	0.00
startled	4	+5	+0.29	+1.25
tense	7	-8	-0.47	-1.14
terrified	1	-1	-0.06	-1.00
upset	3	-2	-0.12	-0.67
worried	4	-7	-0.41	-1.75
other selected words (* in Fig.11)				
	respondents recording change	net change ↑↓	shift per respondent (over all respondents)	shift per respondent affected
active	13	-4	-0.24	-0.31
apprehensive	6	-10	-0.59	-1.67
belligerent	4	-1	-0.06	-0.25
delighted	8	+6	+0.35	+0.75
dissatisfied	4	-4	-0.24	-1.00
inactive	10	+7	+0.41	+0.70
overjoyed	4	+6	+0.35	+1.50
pleased	9	+9	+0.53	+1.00
quiet	10	+5	+0.29	+0.50
rebellious	6	-4	-0.24	-0.67
satisfied	8	-2	-0.12	-0.25
secure	8	-2	-0.12	-0.25
uncertain	8	-10	-0.59	-1.25
<p>* Shift per respondent covering all respondents was calculated by averaging the net unit shift over all 17 respondents.</p> <p>** Shift per respondent affected was calculated by averaging the net unit shift for a particular word over the number of respondents who had indicated a shift for that word.</p>				

Average respondents reporting change for N & G list =  $\frac{57}{19} = 3.00$

Average respondents reporting change for 'other selected words'  
=  $\frac{71}{10} = 7.10$

Average respondents indicating change for all words  
=  $\frac{583}{100} = 5.83$

This would seem clearly to support the tentative thesis outlined above that the comedic in general (and the sexual/excremental/absurdist humour of Meaning of Life in particular) serves to alleviate anxiety by allowing the release of repressed psychic energy. One odd finding, however, particularly in view of the interview material discussed above, is that the word 'shocked' underwent no net change and indeed was only marked up by one respondent, down by one other.

In this context it may be significant that the average number of respondents noting any change over all 100 words was 5.83, whereas for the Nowlis and Green words the average number of respondents recording change was 3.00 (cf. Fig.13). This may indicate that 'anxiety' was not affected by Meaning of Life as much as were other mood-factors not selected as indicative of 'anxiety'. Certainly the Nowlis and Green list leaves room for doubt; while the words in their list seem sound enough, there would appear to be other candidates. Thus 'apprehensive' and 'uncertain' both received net shifts of -10; these shifts could surely also be argued to show reduced anxiety.

Thirdly the other thirteen words included in our analysis (prefixed in Fig.11) tend to corroborate the shifts observed in the Nowlis and Green list. In addition to the downward shift for words such as 'apprehensive', 'uncertain', 'dissatisfied', 'irritated' and others, there is a marked indication of active enjoyment, with large net unit increases for 'delighted', 'overjoyed' and 'pleased'. By contrast, some other words which might be associated with a more



reflective enjoyment were marked down: thus 'satisfied' and 'secure'.

An odd finding, which confirms some very similar observations by Nowlis and Green in their original research,<sup>45</sup> is that pairs of 'opposite' words were not necessarily affected in 'opposite' ways. Thus 'secure' and 'insecure' both experienced a downward shift (-2 and -4 respectively), as did 'satisfied' (-2) and 'dissatisfied' (-4). More ambivalent evidence for the repression-thesis!

Finally, among the results for our other 13 words there is some additional support for the cathartic effect of humour. The score for 'rebellious' went down (-4), as did that for 'active' (-4), while there were increased unit scores for 'quiet' (+5) and 'inactive' (+7).

The analysis of the MACL which has been offered here can make little pretence to statistical rigour. It should not be easy to disagree, however, that at the end of Meaning of Life the respondents were, on the whole, more inactive, more delighted, overjoyed and pleased, and less nervous, less on edge, less worried, apprehensive, tense, uncertain or frustrated.

There is, still, a problem about making generalisations of this kind. As we felt obliged to ask ourselves in the case of the HAT results above, how do individual respondents fit into the overall pattern?<sup>46</sup> In the same way that hardly any respondent could be said to fit the tidy repression-model suggested by the summarized HAT/Q36 results, it may be that no individual respondent profile bears any

resemblance to the results summarized in Figs.12 and 13! Are there any conclusions to be drawn from an examination of the MACL profiles of individual respondents?

H1, for example, recorded a number of mood adjective shifts which appear to go directly against the overall trend which we have described. While the response to 'startled' (+3) is striking, other responses were uniformly against the current. Thus 'active' (+1), 'nervous' (+1), 'pleased' (-1), 'quiet' (-2) and 'tense' (+1).

The responses of H2 indicated increased tiredness, lowered alertness and activeness. Though her score for 'frustrated' was +1, this respondent generally remained in step with the trend. As was the case for a number of respondents, however, there were relatively few shifts recorded for the 32 'key' words on which we focused above.

In the case of H5 there were relatively few shifts in response, particularly for the 32 key-words.

This was also the case for H7, though there were clearly recorded increases in playfulness and activity; in this sense this person was not entirely typical in relation to the prevailing tendency towards quiescence and tranquility.

The shifts recorded for H11 were similar to those for H7.

The responses for H12 indicated a winding-down and contentment, with little of the active enjoyment shown by a number of other

respondents. Though her shift for 'jittery' was '+1', and thus against the general trend, the '+3' of 'quiet' was more typical.

The adjective-shifts recorded by H13 were rather more spectacular, with many scores of +/- 2 or 3. This respondent encapsulated some of the 'contradictory' trends mentioned above (pg.405), wherein apparently opposed adjectives were moved in the same direction! Thus in this instance we had 'carefree' (+2) and 'contemplative' (+3); 'tired' (+2), 'active' (+2) and 'alert' (+3). Nevertheless the overall responses for this subject were fairly consistent in respect to anxiety/catharsis; for example there was 'belligerent' (-2), 'frustrated' (-3), 'tense' (-2) and 'worried' (-2).<sup>47</sup>

L5 also furnished an abundance of MACL responses. The overall impression was of quiescence/relaxation, indeed of a 'typical' paradigm case of released repression. Though the shift for 'satisfied' was -2, most other responses followed the statistical trend: 'afraid' (-3), 'frustrated' (-3), 'insecure' (-1), 'jittery' (-2), 'nervous' (-2), 'on edge' (-2), 'quiet' (+2), 'rebellious' (-1), 'secure' (+1) and 'tense' (-3).

L6 also followed the trend towards quietitude and relaxation, but in this case there were substantially less shifts in the 32 key words, and therefore less indicators with regard to anxiety. 'Typical' responses were 'active' (-3), 'calm' (+3), 'inactive' (+3) and 'quiet' (+2).

Another respondent, L10, appears also to have conformed to a fairly straightforward inhibition-release pattern. In fact this was

the respondent for whom the HAT/Q36 data was particularly inconclusive (cf. pp.394-395 above). Again, though, such an interpretation would seem to be based less on shifts in anxiety-related words than on increased 'pleasure' scores: 'elated' (+2), 'enthusiastic' (+2), 'angry' (-2).

In L12, however, we seem to return to a more wholeheartedly paradigm case. A very heavy response list included 'inspired' (+3) and 'intoxicated' (+2), and there were many indicators of a classical anxiety-reduction process: 'apprehensive' (-2), 'desperate' (-3) (!), 'downhearted' (-2), 'frustrated' (-2), 'insecure' (-2), 'nervous' (-1), 'optimistic' (+2), 'overjoyed' (+2), 'pleased' (+2), 'tense' (-1), 'upset' (-2) and 'worried' (+2).

L14 indicated relatively small attitude changes, with few responses to the 32 key words: 'frustrated' (-2), 'nervous' (-1). On the whole the movement for this subject was towards a greater feeling of activity, of 'inspiration'.

Similarly, L16, whose responses to the HAT exercise and during discussion were so (problematically) enthusiastic, recorded relatively few shifts in the 'anxiety' words. While 'nervous' (-2) and 'on edge' (-1) conformed to the dominant trend, only 'quiet' (+2) and 'rebellious' (+1) gave an indication of the tensions elsewhere evinced by this respondent.

L17 also provided few responses in relation to 'anxiety', most shifts being concerned with an increased quiescence/drowsiness: 'elated' (-2), 'enthusiastic' (-1). One anomalous factor here was

the change for 'in pain'; the shift of +3, while due to an extraneous physical complaint, may well also have influenced the overall pattern of response!

The profile for L22 was very similar, with a few more signs of a more 'classical' alignment: 'nervous' (-2), 'tense' (-1).

Finally, the profile for L23 again provided little data about the 'anxiety' words, while there was a discernible conflict in relation to the 'quiescent' effect of the screening: 'active' (-1), 'inactive' (-1). This respondent's non-enjoyment of Meaning of Life, itself of course consistent with a repression-model, gave rise to the atypical scores of 'pleased' (-1) and 'irritated' (+2). L23 did, after all, record the lowest HAT total for the film.

Again, then, there is a world of difference between a statistical, 'global' description of the adjective shifts produced by our group of respondents and a consideration of each person's individual responses.

Though the interview material is of considerable interest and has thrown up a number of tangential insights, it has proved very difficult to gain any great psychoanalytic insight into individual responses to Meaning of Life. On a 'global'/social level, however, the combined Q36, HAT and MACL results have been stimulating. While a great majority of the respondents denied that a sexual/excremental component played a significant part in their appreciation of Monty Python, there was a striking preference expressed in the Humour Appreciation Tests for the sections containing the birth, the Sperm

Song, the sex-education lesson, and the exploding Mr. Creosote. The shifts in a number of the MACL words indicated quite unambiguously an overall reduction in anxiety/tension. Both these findings are consistent with the repression-model of the comedic outlined in sections 2 and 4.

## Conclusion

As was foreseen in the Introduction, there remains a tension between the theoretical/historical material which predominated in sections 1 and 2 and the interview-based empirical data presented and analysed in section 6. The latter in turn consists of the 'articulable' (the selected extracts from the interview transcript), but also of some additional material (generated from Questionnaire, HAT and MACL results) which give some access at least to the 'inarticulable'.

Though the chief interest of the interview analysis lies in the bones of what exactly the respondents had to say about Meaning of Life, some general points can be made.

'Novelty' and 'the clever' were identified as important elements in the appreciation of Monty Python, as were performance, parody, and some notion of 'attack' or mockery. In instances of arguably tendentious humour (for example the Mr. Creosote sequence) reasons for enjoyment most frequently given included performance and parody.

Novelty also clearly emerged in opposition to the familiar, to repetition. Thus an original liking for the original Monty Python TV material stressed its novelty, whereas appreciation of Meaning of Life tended to refer rather to pleasures of familiarity. Indeed for those respondents who either disliked the early Monty Python or were disappointed with the film we watched, it was also often a matter of too much shocking novelty or of too much of the same. The relative lack of comment/surprise about the absurd elements of Meaning of

Life may also in part have been due to the institutionalisation or routinisation of absurdity, to the loss of novelty-value.

There was considerable ambivalence about the pleasure (?) of anticipation: again there was the tension between the desire for novelty and the comfort of repetition, the endless replaying of Freud's fort-da game.

Most respondents showed little interest in exploring the areas of joke/comic distinctions with respect to Meaning of Life and of understatement as a form of exaggeration.

Several respondents were troubled by the gruesome/violent parts of the film (particularly the Live Organ Transplants sequence), but in practice many of them laughed nevertheless. There was in turn some recognition of a 'release' function performed by laughter in the face of the horrific or the gruesome. There was rather more resistance, however, to the acceptance of laughter in the face of 'smut'. The shock-value of smut was certainly recognized, often approvingly, but its funniness was generally denied: again elements such as performance and satire were identified by those confronted with the fact that they were laughing at 'smutty' humour. There was, unfortunately, relatively little debate about the efficacy of repeated use of 'shocking' material.

There was ambivalence with regard to the issue of sexism and racism in Meaning of Life. Many respondents identified and discussed 'dubious' elements/representations in the film, but again



agreed that they had found such moments funny despite feeling uneasy about them.

Though many respondents were not reluctant to talk about their appreciation of sexual humour in Meaning of Life (section HAT2 in particular), an assessment of the responses was difficult. Caught between the denial of the sexual/excremental (Questionnaire Item 36) and an apparent valorisation of sexual humour (HAT2), the subjects' discourses here are an optimal mix of the articulable and the inarticulable. In many instances it was difficult to know what status to accord what was said; the comments of some respondents seemed to beg for a 'symptomatic' psychoanalytic reading which would uncover the (sexual) anxieties simultaneously allayed and kept in place by sexual humour. Unfortunately there is not a psychoanalyst in the house!

There was less confusion surrounding the responses in the area of the excremental (most specifically the Mr. Creosote sequence) (repressions relating to anality are deeper, less easily disturbed). There was, though, the ambivalence also observed for 'violent' humour; a "yeucchh" response was commonly accompanied by laughter. Indeed a number of respondents enjoyed talking about how 'horrible' and 'over the top' the episode was. The revulsion was an enjoyable one; the section gained a high HAT score.

The most striking finding to emerge from the non-interview material was from the comparison of Questionnaire Item 36 and the HAT results. While the great majority of respondents had indicated in Q36 that the violent and the sexual/excremental were relatively

insignificant in their appreciation of Monty Python, the HAT results showed that sections HAT2 and HAT5 were, for our respondents, by far the funniest parts of the film; these two sections contained the Birth, the Sperm Song, the sex-education lesson, and the exploding Mr. Creosote.

In view of the nature of repressions, it is scarcely surprising that our subjects had been unable to identify the sexual/excremental as an important source of funniness. These results are extremely suggestive for future work on individual readings of comedy/humour within a more rigorous psychoanalytic framework.

The above findings were supported by the marked downward shifts observed in the Mood Adjective Check List words associated with anxiety/tension.

Though we can regret the lack of statistical rigour accompanying these results, I would nevertheless argue that the larger trends outlined above can be adduced as heuristic evidence that, with the sample of respondents used in this instance, screenings of Meaning of Life had the 'effect' of reducing tension/anxiety. Further, though there is no question of proof, or of any demonstrable relation in the context of this study, such a reduction of tension is consistent with the repression-model of the comedic developed throughout the thesis. We have also seen how this model accounts for our other substantial finding relating reported preferences to humour appreciation for different segments of the film.

We are left, in the end, with the irreducible difference between the statistical/general picture and an account of individual differences. We are caught between a scientific, necessarily hypostasising account of overall trends and a less 'scientific' accounting for a set of 'impure' personal responses. While the insights of the collected Q36, HAT and MACL data are certainly provocative and useful, therefore, it is important to reaffirm, finally, the centrality of (usually neglected) viewer-response interview/discussion material in any attempt to understand the psycho-social functions of tendentious humour.

Footnotes: Introduction

1. Quoted in Roger Wilmut, 'From Fringe to Flying Circus' (Methuen London 1982) pg.214
2. J. Udris, 'I'm All Right Jack: The Politics of Comedy' (Dissertation for MA degree at Polytechnic of Central London, 1982)
3. The terms 'immanence' and 'negotiation' used here are drawn from a model in Jerry Palmer, 'The Logic of the Absurd' (BFI London 1987) pp.19-25
4. Janice Radway, 'Reading the Romance' (University of North Carolina Press 1984)
5. David Morley, 'The Nationwide Audience' (BFI 1980) and 'Family Television - Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure' (Comedia, London 1986)

Footnotes: Section 1

1. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Aristocracy of Culture' in 'Media, Culture and Society' 1980 (2) pg.225
2. Mary Douglas, 'Purity and Danger' (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1966) pg.36. In discussing Edmund Leach's relating humour to taboo, particularly to childlike fluidity/continuity as opposed to 'adult' fixity and rigidity, Chris Wilson notes (in our context prematurely) that "... one must draw the exciting conclusion that humour pinpoints the faults and inconsistencies in our cosmologies." (Chris Wilson, 'Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function' (Academic Press 1979) pg.13)
3. Douglas op. cit. pg.38
4. Roland Barthes, 'Sade, Fourier, Loyola' (Seuil, Paris 1971) pg.140
5. Sir John Harington, 'The Metamorphosis of Ajax' (originally published 1596; refs. are to 1814 edn.) pg.32
6. St. Augustine, 'De Magistro I': 'De Locutionis Significatione' cited Jacques Lacan, 'Séminaire I', in Laporte op. cit. pg.18
7. Dominique Laporte, 'Histoire de la Merde' (Première Livraison, Paris 1978) pg.18
8. Sigmund Freud, preface to German version of John G. Bourke, 'Scatologic Rites of All Nations' quoted Laporte op. cit. pg.19
9. Michael Steig, 'Defining the Grotesque: an Attempt at Synthesis' in 'Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism' (vol. 29) 1970
10. ibid. pg.259
11. Alan Brien, review of Monty Python's Life of Brian in 'Sunday Times' 18.11.79
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Rabelais and His World' (MIT Cambridge, Mass. 1968) pg.18
13. ibid. pg.19
14. ibid. pg.20
15. ibid. pg.21
16. ibid. pg.25
17. ibid. pg.26
18. Pierre Bonaffé, 'Objet magique, sorcellerie et fétichisme' in 'Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse' no.2 (1970) pp.166-167

19. Terry Gilliam, quoted by John Walker in 'Sunday Express Magazine' 12.7.81
20. Bakhtin op. cit. pp.304-317
21. ibid. pg.317
22. ibid. pg.335
23. Melanie Klein, 'The Psychoanalysis of Children' (trans. Alix Strachey) (International Psychoanalytic Library no.22) (Hogarth Press London 1954) pg.291
24. Klaus Theweleit 'Male Fantasies', (Polity Press, Cambridge 1987) pg.399
25. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.376
26. Festivals of this kind are discussed in relation to comedy by Richard Boston, 'The Anatomy of Laughter' (Collins 1974) and by Wylie Sypher, 'Comedy' (Doubleday and Anchor, New York 1956)
27. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.10
28. Terry Eagleton, 'Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism' (NLB London 1981) pg.148
29. ibid. pg.149
30. Tony Bennett, 'A Thousand and One Troubles: Blackpool Pleasure Beach' in 'Formations of Pleasure' (RKP London 1983) pg.153
31. Alain Corbin 'The Foul and the Fragrant' (Berg Publishers Ltd., 1986) (originally Le Miasme et la Jonquille, Eds. Aubier Montaigne 1982). We shall have cause to refer to this source again.
32. Norman O. Brown is eloquent in his linking of capitalism with radical changes in this area. "... the precipitating factors in a psychological upheaval such as the Protestant Reformation is not any change in toilet-training patterns, but an irruption of fresh material from deeper strata of the unconscious made possible by a large-scale transformation of the structure of the projective system (the culture). (Norman O. Brown, 'Life Against Death' (RKP London 1959) pg.230. "In this dehumanized human nature man loses contact with his own body, more specifically with his senses, with sensuality and with the pleasure-principle." (pg.238)
33. Richard Dyer, 'Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society' (BFI/Macmillan 1987) pg.138
34. Ernest Mandel, 'Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory' (Pathfinder Press, New York 1979) pg.12
35. ibid. pg.13

36. We are here working with a model of the imaginary relation and of ideology developed by Louis Althusser. I do not propose to argue the finer points, but to accept the basic model.
37. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.24
38. ibid. pg.39
39. Eagleton op. cit. (1981) pg.150
40. John Cleese, quoted Wilmut op. cit. pg.151
41. Frederick Furnivall, 'The Babees Book' (1908 edition 'translated' by Edith Rickert) pg.xxx
42. This constitutes Volume I of Elias' 'The Civilizing Process' (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1978). cf. also Corbin op. cit.
43. Furnivall op. cit. pg.xxx
44. Erasmus, 'De Civilitate Morum Puerilium' (1530) quoted Elias pg.130
45. Quoted in Laporte op. cit. pg.21
46. Quoted in Elias op. cit. pg.132
47. Elias op. cit. pg.151
48. Furnivall op. cit. pg.(xiv)
49. Elias op. cit. pg.138
50. The inverted commas are necessary to stress the absence of any hygienist basis for the term in this context; also, no mention is made in the edict of other wastes such as washing-water, peelings.
51. Laporte op. cit. pp.20-21
52. Bourke op. cit. pg.136
53. La Morandière (1764) quoted, Augustin Cabanes, 'Moeurs Intimes du Passé' (Paris 1908) pg.382
54. Félix Hatin 'Essai médico-philosophique sur les moyens d'améliorer l'état sanitaire de la classe indigente' (1832) pg.3. cf. also Corbin pp.174, 222-223
55. Bourke op. cit. pg.134
56. Bourke quoting Cook, John Hawkesworth, 'An Account of the Voyages Undertaken ...' vol.II (1773) pg.314
57. Quoted in Elias op. cit. pg.131
58. Quoted ibid. pg.132

59. Elias op. cit. pg.59
60. ibid. pg.116
61. ibid. pg.118
62. Laporte op. cit. pg.31
63. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Anti-Oedipus' (University of Minnesota Press 1983) pg.125
64. Corbin op. cit. pg.61
65. ibid. pg.143
66. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.211
67. ibid. pg.269
68. Just as we have noted how slowly attitudes to excrement changed between the 15th and 18th centuries, it is easy to ignore that the further modification of this kind of practice has also been a very slow process. The 'midnight mechanics' of North-East England are a recent equivalent of such functionaries. At Low Hawxley modified wheelbarrows were until recently used as toilets to facilitate waste-disposal. (cf. Frank Graham, 'The Georgie Netty' (Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1977))
69. Laporte op. cit. pg.32
70. ibid. pg.32. This is echoed by Guy Hocquenghem, 'Homosexual Desire' (Allison and Busby, London 1978) pg.83
71. Laporte op. cit. pg.33
72. Theweleit op. cit. pg.312
73. ibid. pg.419
74. Bourke op. cit. pg.138
75. Nita Clarke and Phil Evans, 'London for Beginners' ('Writers and Readers' London 1984) pg.54
76. Elias op. cit. pg.121
77. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.302. Klaus Theweleit also takes up the identity of the economic and psychical instances: "Thus a new relation becomes evident: the hostility between worker and machine, set up by the capitalist, is identical to the hostility the bourgeois ego reserves for the productive force of its own unconscious." (op. cit. pg.257)
78. Elias op. cit. pg.121



79. Freedom of natural functions was perhaps coextensive with a laissez-faire attitude to waste-disposal. Hawkesworth describes the consequences of the King of Spain's efforts, around 1760, to introduce privies into the households of Madrid.
- "Every class devised some objection against it, but the physicians bid the fairest to interest the King in the preservation of the ancient privileges of his people; for they remonstrated that if the filth was not, as usual, thrown into the streets, a fatal sickness would probably ensue, because the putrescent particles of the air, which such filth attracted, would then be imbibed by the human body." Although the edict prevailed, "... many of the citizens, probably upon the principles advocated by their physicians, that heaps of filth prevent deleterious particles of air from fixing upon neighbouring substances, have, to keep their food wholesome, constructed their privies by the kitchen fire." (Hawkesworth op. cit. pg.315). According to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, during the same period in Paris latrines were also commonly to be found very close to kitchens. (Tableau de Paris (1782-1788) vol.11 pg.54). For an abundance of examples of resistance to the spread of 'hygienism', cf. Corbin op. cit., especially pp. 211-221
80. Quoted Elias op. cit. pg.156
81. The influence of Arabic/Musulman customs in France in the last centuries was considerable; many of the customs would now be said to have been based on sound medical/hygienist grounds.
82. Elias op. cit. pg.135
83. ibid. pg.139
84. ibid. pg.152
85. Dyer op. cit. (1987) pg.138
86. Philippe Ariès, 'L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale' (Librairie Plon, 1960) pg.105
87. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.319
88. ibid. pg.319
89. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Ce Que Parler Veut Dire' (Fayard, Paris, 1982) pg.92
90. ibid. pg.93
91. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.28
92. Eagleton op. cit. (1981) pg.146
93. Paul Eluard, quoted Laporte op. cit. pg.11

94. Bourdieu op. cit. (1982) pg.36
95. Louis Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays' (NLB London, 1977) pp.141 ff.
96. Elias op. cit. pg.140
97. Brown op. cit. pg.297
98. ibid. pp.297-298
99. Françoise Dolto, 'Fragrance' in 'Sorcières' no.5 pg.15. This is a French feminist journal (eds. Albatros); this particular issue contains a number of articles concerning the sense of smell and its relation to excrement. cf. also Corbin op. cit. pg.213
100. Mia Campioni and Liz Gross, 'Little Hans: the Production of Oedipus' (in eds. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris 'Language, Sexuality and Subversion' (Feral pubs., Darlington Australia, 1978) pg.100
101. This should of course read 'mother-figure'. My excuse is that this would be too cumbersome!
102. Dolto op. cit. pg.12
103. ibid. pg.12
104. ibid. pg.12
105. ibid. pg.12
106. ibid. pg.12
107. ibid. pg.13
108. Gershon Legman, 'La Psychanalyse de l'Humour Erotique' (French version of English text) (Robert Laffont, Paris 1971) pg.50
109. Hocquenghem op. cit. pg.84
110. Brown op. cit. pg.293
111. Theweleit op. cit. pg.413
112. Brown op. cit. pg.299
113. Brown goes on to assert that "contemporary social theory ... has been completely taken in by the inhuman abstractness of the path of sublimation, and has no contact with concrete human beings, with their concrete bodies, their concrete though repressed desires and their concrete neuroses." (pg.318). It could be argued that it is not only "contemporary social theory" that is guilty of this; in his own formulation, "behind this scientific pose of the psychoanalyst lies the repressed problem of the psychoanalysis of psychoanalyst itself" (pg.

- 234). If "psychoanalysis takes the final step of showing the origins of the myths which sustain social power and power struggles in the repression of the human body" (pg.252), is psychoanalysis itself exempt from the morbidity of "the unconscious schemata governing the pursuit of knowledge in modern civilization" (pg.236)? Hardly!
114. *ibid.* pg.259
  115. *ibid.* pg.253
  116. *ibid.* pg.235
  117. *ibid.* pg.235
  118. *ibid.* pg.236 - Ferenczi ref. above
  119. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.170
  120. Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id' (Hogarth Press London 1927) pg.48
  121. Hocquenghem op. cit. pg.82
  122. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pp.142-143
  123. "... every person who pretended to nauseate the smell of another's excretions, snuffed up his own with particular complacency." (Tobias Smollett, 'Humphry Clinker' (Penguin 1982 edn.) pg.46. "... c'est lorsque l'inspiration lui manquait que Michelet justement allait inspirer dans les latrines le remugle suffocant qui portait en son esprit le souffle animant, au propre comme au figuré, sa création." (Laporte op. cit. pg.39) (Laporte's emphasis). On Michelet, cf. also Corbin op. cit. pg.219
  124. Laporte op. cit. pg.41
  125. *ibid.* pg.60
  126. *ibid.* pg.74
  127. Patrick Süskind 'Perfume' (Penguin 1986) pp.129-130. Corbin writes of "the baffling poverty of the language" with regard to smells (op. cit. pg.6)
  128. Laporte op. cit. pg.74
  129. Brown op. cit. pg.187
  130. *ibid.* pg.188
  131. Thus "psychoanalytic symbolism ... is characterized by its universality: the symbols which translate dream wishes or neurotic complexes are common to all peoples..." Anika Lemaire, 'Jacques Lacan' (RKP 1977) pg.46, summarising from E. Benveniste, 'Problèmes de Linguistique Générale' (Gallimard, Paris 1966)

132. Elias op. cit. pg.150
133. Laporte op. cit. pg.105
134. Brown op. cit. pg.200
135. ibid. pg.205. cf. Erich Fromm, 'Escape from Freedom' (Rhinehart New York 1941) pg.73
136. Brown op. cit. pg.256
137. ibid. pg.275
138. Campioni and Gross op. cit. pg.100
139. ibid. pg.100
140. ibid. pg.110
141. ibid. pg.114
142. ibid. pg.100
143. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.143
144. Campioni and Gross op. cit. pg.115
145. ibid. pg.103
146. Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, 'Le Nouveau Désordre Amoureux' (Seuil/Points, Paris, 1977) pg.43
147. ibid. pp.40-41
148. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.352
149. ibid. pg.356
150. ibid. pg.292
151. Campioni and Gross op. cit. pg.114
152. ibid. pg.105, quoting Sigmund Freud 'Three Essays' (S.E.) pg.87
153. Campioni and Gross op. cit. pg.105
154. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.74
155. ibid. pg.45
156. ibid. pg.115
157. ibid. pg.177
158. Dolto op. cit. pp.15-16
159. ibid. pg.14

160. *ibid.* pg.14
161. John Bourke notes the difficulties experienced by large numbers of Malays when they moved from a maritime environment to land-based homes. Habits which had previously been no problem now became "smelly" and "dirty". (*op. cit.* pg.144)
162. cf. Etienne de Bonnot Condillac, 'Traité des Sensations' (1754)
163. Corbin *op. cit.* pg.288, footnote 54. cf. Edgar Bérillon, 'Psychologie de l'olfaction: la fascination olfactive chez les animaux et chez l'homme', 'Revue de l'Hypnotisme' October 1908 pp.98 ff.
164. Dolto *op. cit.* pg.14
165. Elias *op. cit.* pg.127
166. *ibid.* pg.128
167. Laporte *op. cit.* pg.85
168. Pliny, 'Natural History' bk XVIII ch. V(2), cited in Laporte *op. cit.* pp.81-82, 84, 86-87, 90-91. cf. also Corbin *op. cit.* pp.67 & 212
169. Mircea Eliade 'Le Mythe de L'Eternel Retour' (nrf Gallimard, Paris 1949)
170. Brown *op. cit.* pg.298
171. *ibid.* pg.271
172. Bourdieu *op. cit.* (1982) pg.41
173. Deleuze and Guattari *op. cit.* pg.234
174. Bourdieu *op. cit.* (1982) pg.36
175. *ibid.* pg.76
176. *ibid.* pg.63
177. Deleuze and Guattari refer to "the Nietzschean idea of a language of masters through which ... enslavement is accomplished" (*op. cit.* pg.208)
178. G. Lakoff, interview with Herman Parrett, University of California mimeo, October 1973, pg.38
179. Bourdieu *op. cit.* pg.89
180. *ibid.* pg.89
181. *ibid.* pp.90-91
182. Bakhtin *op. cit.* pg.11

183. Laporte op. cit. pg.15
184. "y thenne Papa Turd shooke the peare-tree long sithens named SHAKES-PEARE by ye Englysshe, and under thatte name hadd fro it manie ffine maniuscript tragaedies" (Gershon Legman and B. Keith, 'King Turd' (translation of Jarry's 'Ubu Roi'), 1953)
185. Laporte op. cit. pg.42
186. ibid. pg.43
187. Brown op. cit. pg.266
188. ibid. pg.287
189. ibid. pg.293. This idea surfaces, (perhaps not so) surprisingly, in some strip-cartoons produced by Steve Bell for the Guardian (ca. 1985) in which "the turd" replaces other major commodities/currencies in dominating stock-market prices.
190. Brown op. cit. pp.302-303
191. ibid. pg.303
192. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'In a State' in 'Screen Education' no.30
193. ibid. pg.9
194. Laporte op. cit. pg.44
195. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.33
196. Hocquenghem op. cit. pg.82
197. ibid. pp.82-83
198. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.142
199. In Ken McMullen's film Ghost Dance, one of the characters says: "For a while I worked for this big company that dealt in money ... I only saw the fat bastards who eat it ... and they do eat it, so it doesn't get stolen from them. They store it in their bellies until it converts to money-turds, then they shit it out, straight into the bank."
200. One of a number of documented examples of taxation which made this 'cleansing' explicit was the 'Chrysagire', a tax on all excrement established under the Roman Emperor Constantine. (cf. Laporte op. cit. pg.66)
201. Laporte op. cit. pg.49
202. op. cit. pg.50
203. op. cit. pg.62

204. An outstanding example of this kind of literature was produced by Pierre Leroux, a utopian socialist theorist who explicitly recommended that every citizen should donate their excrement to the State, which could then distribute this as free fertilizer ... presto, an end to starvation! ...

"L'homme est reproducteur de sa propre subsistance."

"Tout homme est à la fois producteur et consommateur et, s'il consomme, il produit." (Leroux, Appendix to 'Aux Etats de Jersey' (1853) pp.109-114, and 'De l'Humanité, de son Principe, et de son Avenir, où se Trouve Exposé la Vraie Définition de la Religion et où on Explique le Sens, la Suite et l'Enchaînement du Mosaïsme et du Christianisme' (Paris 1840)

It would be interesting, if we recall Hocquenghem's linking of private money with the privatization of the anus, to speculate about how the status of the anal may be different in a socialist economy/society. There is, however, no simplistic equation to be made, except in the case of a strictly utopian socialism. It has been reported that under the 'socialistic' Pol Pot regime of Cambodia, in the labour camps where ex-bourgeois elements were put to work, inmates were expected to produce a minimum quantity of shit each day; those who did not were beaten. Elsewhere, in the 19th Century,

"... the superiority (of human excrement) seemed undisputed at that time ... 'Every kilogram of urine is equivalent to a kilogram of wheat' declared Sponi." (Corbin op. cit. pp.117-118)

205. Corbin op. cit. pp.115-116

206. ibid. pg.120

207. Laporte op. cit. pg.102

208. Corbin op. cit. pg.69

209. Bourdieu op. cit. (1982) pg.95

210. Laporte op. cit. pg.102

Footnotes: Section 2

1. Sypher op. cit. pg.219
2. George Meredith, 'An Essay on Comedy;' (1897) pg.8
3. Moelwyn Merchant, 'Comedy' ('Critical Idiom' series, Methuen, London, 1972)
4. cf. Max Eastman, 'Enjoyment of Laughter' (Hamish Hamilton, 1937)
5. Gershon Legman, 'Love and Death' (Breaking Point, New York, 1949) (pg.31)
6. Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' (Pelican Freud Library, 1976) pg.302
7. Mick Eaton, postscript to Steve Neale, 'Psychoanalysis and Comedy' in Screen vol.22 no.2 (1981) pg.42
8. Seymour Goodlad, 'The Social Significance of Television Comedy' in C.W.E. Bigsby (ed.) 'Approaches to Popular Culture' (Arnold, 1976)
9. "'Traduttore - Traditore!' the words - one of the jokes discussed by Freud ... might appropriately be emblazoned on the title-page of the present volume." (editor's introduction, Freud 1976 pg.34)
10. Editor's introduction to Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.36
11. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.93-94, 125-126
12. ibid. pg.126
13. ibid. pg.270
14. Neale op. cit. pg.34
15. Henri Bergson, 'Le Rire' (La Revue de Paris, 1900); 'Laughter' (transl. Brereton and Rothwell) (Macmillan and Co., London, 1935) pg.88
16. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.282
17. ibid. pg.284
18. Useful extracts in Paul Lauter, (ed.) 'Theories of Comedy' (Anchor Doubleday and Co., New York, 1964)
19. Wilson op. cit. pg.141
20. ibid. pg.9
21. John Palmer, 'Comedy' (Martin Secker, London, 1914) pg.5



22. Bergson op. cit. pg.2
23. ibid. pg.37
24. ibid. pg.16
25. ibid. pg.29
26. ibid. pg.58
27. ibid. pg.69
28. Theweleit op. cit. pg.211
29. Bergson op. cit. pg.198
30. ibid. pg.96
31. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.52-64 ff. and 69 ff.
32. Arthur Koestler, 'Act of Creation' (Hutchinson, London, 1964)
33. Quoted in Boston op. cit. (1974) pg.63
34. Koestler op. cit. pp.38-42
35. ibid. pg.35
36. ibid. pg.59. Koestler's model was in some ways foreshadowed by Beattie in 1776: "Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them." quoted in D.E. Berlyne, 'Laughter, Humour and Play' in Lindzey and Aronson (eds.), 'Handbook of Social Psychology' (Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass, 1968) pg.800
37. Koestler op. cit. pp.64-65
38. Brian Henderson, 'Romantic Comedy Today' in 'Film Quarterly' (Summer 1978)
39. Berlyne op. cit. pp.798-799
40. These and other examples in Boston op. cit. 1974
41. Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues' in Goldstein and McGhee (eds.) 'The Psychology of Humour' (Academic Press, New York and London, 1972)
42. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.192-193
43. ibid. pg.176

44. There is no intention here to give any systematic account of different psychoanalytic models of pleasure. I shall supplement a basically Freudian trajectory with Lacanian terminology/references where they seem appropriate.
45. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.178
46. Details in Sigmund Freud, 'On Metapsychology, the Theory of Psychoanalysis' (Pelican Freud Library vol.11) pp.283-287
47. Lemaire op. cit. pg.52
48. ibid. pg.145
49. ibid. pp.149-150. For a brief but extremely lucid 'summary' of Lacanian concepts, cf. Steve Burniston and Chris Weedon, 'Ideology, Subjectivity and the Artistic Text' in 'Working Papers in Cultural Studies' no.10 (Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, University Birmingham)
50. Neale op. cit. pg.31, quoting Samuel Weber, 'The Divaricator: Remarks on Freud's Witz' in 'Glyph' no.1, 1977, pp.22-23
51. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.193
52. Bergson op. cit. pg.70
53. ibid. pg.73
54. Koestler op. cit. pg.93
55. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.171
56. Roger Wilmut, op. cit. pg.130
57. ibid. pg.205
58. ibid. pg.222
59. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.282
60. ibid. pg.283
61. ibid. pp.138-139
62. Terry Eagleton, 'Poetry, Pleasure and Politics' in 'Formations of Pleasure' (RKP, London, 1983) pg.63
63. Constance Penley, 'The Avant-Garde and its Imaginary' in 'Camera Obscura' no.2 pg.17
64. We leave aside here aural pleasures (music, sound-effects, silence) and visual pleasures (colour, movement, scopophilia and its complications) which are (albeit complexly mediated) residues of primary sensory pleasures.
65. 'Monty Python's The Meaning of Life' (Methuen, London 1983)

66. cf. in particular Jean-François Lyotard, 'Economie Libidinale' (Minuit, Paris, 1975)
67. Fredric Jameson, 'Pleasure: a Political Issue' in 'Formations of Pleasure' (RKP, London, 1983) pg.9
68. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.49
69. Bruckner and Finkielkraut op. cit. pg.43
70. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.216
71. ibid. pg.112
72. ibid. pg.357
73. Theweleit op. cit. pp.410-411
74. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.306
75. ibid. pg.173
76. ibid. pg.162
77. ibid. pg.269
78. ibid. pg.312
79. ibid. pg.118
80. ibid. pg.313
81. ibid. pp.354-355
82. ibid. pg.167
83. ibid. pg.311
84. ibid. pg.334
85. ibid. pg.24
86. ibid. pg.183
87. "Dissolving human bodies appears to be the real work of the revolution". (Theweleit op. cit. pg.238)
88. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.296
89. Interview in 'Gay News' no.4, 1972
90. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pp.109-110
91. ibid. pg.291
92. ibid. pg.35

93. While Deleuze and Guattari themselves retain a toe in the 'materialist' camp, Klaus Theweleit, while applauding their work, is scornful of attempts to materialize psychoanalysis.

"All of the lines of scientific research based purely on ideological criticism ... and all of the theoretical approaches that practice historical-materialist-philosophical meta-psychological-manipulations in an attempt to thrust Freud and Marx (or vice versa) onto a single pedestal ... ignore the same basic idea: the things that happen in, and to, human bodies (psychic matter). They have no category for the desiring-production of the unconscious, from which all reality, 'psychic' as well as 'social', derives." (op. cit. pg.416)

94. Desmond Morris, 'The Naked Ape' (Cape 1967). This and other biologicistic approaches are discussed in Boston op. cit. (1974) pp.36 ff. and in Berlyne op. cit.

95. Boston op. cit. (1974) pg.27 quoting Goldstein and McGhee op. cit. The possible health-benefits of laughter are, or course, also a modern concern. Following a report that there had been a drop in the average time spent laughing by French people from 19 minutes a day in 1938 and 6 mins./day in 1980 to 1 min./day in 1987, "'Le Figaro' ... points out that there is a health hazard involved since (according to another piece of research) laughter is tremendously therapeutic, one minute of wild laughter ("fou rire") being worth 45 minutes of gymnastics." (Richard Boston, The Guardian, April 9th 1987, pg.19)

96. "External determinants often cannot be perceived in a finished object, whether that determinant be the repression that produces a pun or the sweated labour that produces a shirt." (Charles Eckert, 'Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller', Jump Cut no.2 (July/August 1972) pg.1)

97. Eastman op. cit. pg.279

98. Boston op. cit. (1974) pg.76. Hugh Carlton-Greene, Director-General at BBC from 1960 to 1969, was keen on developing That Was The Week That Was: "I had the idea that it was a good time in history to have a programme that would do something to prick the pomposity of public figures." (quoted Wilmut op. cit. pg.58)

99. Ref. Andy Murphy in 'The Heavy Stuff' (Class War 'theoretical journal') no.1 (Dec. '87) pg.8

100. Jean-Claude Carrière, 'Humour 1900' (Eds. 'J'ai lu', Paris, 1963) pg.9

101. Sypher op. cit. pg.244

102. Allan Rodway, 'English Comedy' (Chatto and Windus, London, 1975) pg.23

103. Richard Stephenson, quoted in Berlyne pg.811. cf. footnote 138 below.
104. Wilson op. cit. pg.194
105. Eastman op. cit. pp.272-274
106. Wilson op. cit. pg.194
107. Gerald Mast 'The Comic Mind' (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1973)
108. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, 'Language and Materialism' (RKP, London, 1977) pg.50
109. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Written Discussion', 'After-image' no.6 pg.36-37
110. Michel Marie, in 'Lectures du Film' (Eds. Albatros, Paris, 1975) pp.130-131
111. "... discussions of comedy cannot be separated from ideological/political positions available in a class society." Mick Eaton, 'Laughter in the Dark' in 'Screen' vol.22 no.2 (1981) pg.22
112. Eastman op. cit. pg.121
113. Rodway op. cit. pg.24
114. H.D. Duncan, 'Communication and Social Order' (Bedminster Press, New York, 1962) pg.378
115. Wilson op. cit. pp.230-231. Something of this is caught in the popular stereotype of the hyper-rationalist's incomprehension of humour. One of the best examples of this has been Spock in Star Trek!
116. Sypher op. cit. pg.222
117. Bergson op. cit. pg.197
118. Eric Midwinter, 'Make 'em Laugh: Famous Comedians and Their Worlds' (Allen and Unwin, London, 1979) pg.14
119. ibid. pg.15
120. Eastman op. cit. pg.277. The Monty Python 'Upper Class Twit of the Year' sketch has been reviewed as "pure satire ... all the more effective because of its underlying contempt." (William Davis, 'Daily Telegraph' 21st June 1974)
121. Boston op. cit. (1974) pp.32-33

122. Herbert Barry, 'Role of subject-matter in individual differences in humour' in 'Journal of Genetic Psychology' vol.35 (1928) pg.122. For further discussion of the contentious question of humour 'preferences' related to anxiety, cf. Section 4 below.
123. Mast op. cit. pg.10
124. Quoted Duncan op. cit. pg.412. Schoenberger was editor of the journal 'Simplicimus' in the 1930's
125. Sypher op. cit. pg.244, invoking a model of comedicity of the 'ambivalence' type (cf. footnote 241 above)
126. 'Films and Filming' April 1964 pg.9
127. Orrin Klapp, 'The Fool as a Social Type' in 'American Journal of Sociology' vol.45 (Sept. 1948) pg.157
128. Quoted Boston op. cit. (1974) pg.123
129. Sypher op. cit. pg.230
130. Ludwig Jekel, 'On the Psychology of Comedy' available in Lauter op. cit.
131. Martin Grotjahn, 'Beyond Laughter' (McGraw-Hill, 1957; paperback 1966) pg.86
132. Hobbes' 'Leviathan' quoted Berlyne pg.800
133. Grotjahn op. cit. pg.17
134. in David Nathan, 'The Laughtermakers: Quest for Comedy' (Owen, London 1971) pg.186
135. Boston op. cit. (1974) pg.23
136. Enid Welsford, 'The Fool: His Social and Literary History' (Faber and Faber, London, 1935) pg.314
137. ibid. pg.315
138. Richard Stephenson, 'Conflict and Control Functions of Humour' 'American Journal of Sociology' vol.56 (May 1951) pg.569
139. Mast op. cit. pg.22
140. Bergson op. cit. pg.177
141. R.E. Perl, 'Influence of a Social Factor upon Appreciation of Humour' in 'American Journal of Psychology' vol.45 (1933). For a more extended discussion of experimental work on humour, cf. Section 4 below.

142. This concept and much of the model of ideology implicitly operated here are drawn from Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (op. cit. 1977) (cf. also footnotes 36 and 95 in Section 1 above and pp.131 ff.)
143. Sypher op. cit. pp.242-243
144. Max Beerhohm, quoted Koestler op. cit. pg.53
145. Harold Nicolson, 'The English Sense of Humour and Other Essays' (Constable and Co., London, 1956) pg.31
146. ibid. pg.34
147. Harington op. cit. pg.19
148. 'Laughter Among Colleagues' in 'Psychiatry' vol.23 (1960) pp. 81-95. Coser's findings can be contested. Thus J. Emerson finds (in a study of ... joking among medical personnel in formal meetings) that senior personnel devote a far higher percentage of their speaking time to jokes than do juniors, whose few jokes are usually self-disparaging." (Palmer op. cit. pg.1) The reference is to Joan Emerson, 'Negotiating the Serious Import of Humour' in 'Sociometry' vol.32 (1969) pp. 169-181
149. Wilson op. cit. pg.214
150. ibid. pg.214
151. Sypher op. cit. pg.242
152. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.208
153. Welsford op. cit. pg.317
154. Neale op. cit. pg.39
155. Eagleton op. cit. (1983) pg.61
156. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.77
157. ibid. pg.166
158. ibid. pg.166
159. ibid. pg.167
160. The summary of the joke-techniques is in Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.76
161. ibid. pg.169
162. ibid. pg.172
163. Sypher op. cit. pg.175

164. cf. Freud's 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (Pelican Freud Library no.4, 1976 (II)). A summary of the dream-work and the mechanisms of fragmentation, displacement and condensation is given in Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.216-222. We can note again that Bergson, without any working model of the unconscious, intuitively grasped this: "Any play of ideas may afford us amusement if only it brings back to mind, more or less distinctly, the play of dreamland." (op. cit. pg.187)
165. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.223
166. ibid. pg.225
167. ibid. pg.173
168. ibid. pg.238
169. ibid. pg.230
170. ibid. pg.230
171. ibid. pg.181
172. ibid. pg.183
173. Grotjahn op. cit. pg.10
174. Eastman op. cit. pg.299
175. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.188
176. Eagleton op. cit. (1983) pg.63. This is part of a discussion of "A terrible beauty is born" (the final line of Yeats' 'Easter 1916')
177. ibid. pg.62
178. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.147
179. ibid. pg.182
180. ibid. pg.184
181. ibid. pg.281
182. ibid. pg.291
183. ibid. pg.288. Freud seems here to oversimplify the child/adult distinction. The socialisation of the infant begins very early, and the laughter of superiority already presupposes recognition of the other, hence a degree of subjection to symbolisation, hence the incipient presence of repression mechanisms. If the ridicule-component in joking/laughter is highest around the age of 7 (as Kimmins has suggested in Eastman op. cit. pg.268), it is hard to follow Freud in assuming that there is



nothing 'comic' involved. Or else Freud should have indicated at precisely what stage he sees the relevant inhibitions as becoming effective.

184. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.289
185. ibid. pg.288
186. ibid. pg.292
187. Eastman op. cit. pg.46
188. ibid. pg.58
189. Most of these 'laws' are commented on in Eastman op. cit. pg.19
190. ibid. pg.32
191. cf. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.282-285
192. This is to be distinguished from the remarks made above (pg.97) regarding the way in which tension in a given situation can increase the enjoyment of the comedic. Here Freud is referring specifically to the 'comic' sense, whereas the remarks made by Herbert Barry were to be applied to jokes.
193. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.302
194. No attempt will be made here at any rigour concerning development with respect to age. Most of the remarks will be concerned with a phase corresponding perhaps to age 4-10 years, when verbal symbolisation is taken for granted.
195. This is not to imply that Lacan's "theory" is itself ignorant of this conjunctural specificity. Despite the terrain which Lacan was working on, it is possible to assert that "The path marked out by Lacan led in a completely different direction. He is not content to turn, like the analytic squirrel, inside the wheel of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, he refuses to be caught up in the Oedipal Imaginary and the oedipalising structure ..." (Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.308)
196. Neale op. cit. pg.40
197. ibid. pg.41
198. Rosemary Jackson, 'Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion' (Methuen, London/New York, 1981) pg.176
199. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pp.132-133
200. ibid. pg.161
201. ibid. pg.368

202. Philip Thomson, 'The Grotesque' (Methuen 1972) quoted in John O. Thompson (ed.) 'Monty Python, Complete and Utter Theory of the Grotesque' (BFI, 1982) pp.29-30
203. Colin McCabe, 'Principles of Realism and Pleasure' in 'Screen' vol.17 no.3 (1976) pg.21
204. Arthur Kroker, David Cook, 'The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-aesthetics' (MacMillan, 1988) pg.23
205. Wilmut op. cit. pg.197
206. Charles, 'The Clown's Functions', quoted Pollio and Edgerly, 'Comedians and the Comic Style', in Chapman and Foot (eds.) 'International Conference of Humour and Laughter' (1977) pp.217-218
207. Quoted in Gay News no.4 (1972), in Thompson op. cit. pg.34
208. Wilmut op. cit. pg.203
209. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.422
210. ibid. pg.424
211. ibid.
212. Jackson op. cit. pg.135
213. ibid. pg.178. "Reason is the devil's bride and whore" (Brown, op. cit. pg.213)
214. We shall refer here to the English language version of Legman's 'The Rationale of the Dirty Joke' (Grove Press, 1968) and also to the French language version 'Psychanalyse de l'Humour Erotique' (Robert Laffont, Paris 1971) (cf. footnote 108 of Section 1 above)
215. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.243
216. Legman gives the following example. "Oh mama, guess what I saw daddy and the maid doing on the bed!" "Be quiet!" then, after a moment's reflection, "You wait till mama asks you". At the supper table that night she says "Now, Johnnie, what were you going to tell me this morning?" "Nothing, only that I saw daddy and the maid on the bed together, doing just like you and Uncle John did last summer when daddy was away fishing." (op. cit. 1968, pg.59)
217. Legman op. cit. (1971) pg.51
218. ibid. pg.51
219. ibid. pg.65
220. ibid. pg.60

221. 'Histoires de Très Mauvais Goût' anon (Solar Ed., Paris, 1984, pp.53 & 57)
222. transl. of Latin. "Everything unknown is taken for obscene". This is attributed to Tacitus, quoting Galgacus. In a different context we can note two comments by Harold Nicolson: "It is only in England that jokes are constantly directed against erudition, scholarship, professional knowledge, or literary and artistic originality." "... the tendency of the English to regard as comic, insincere or pretentious anything which they do not happen personally to understand." (op. cit. pp.43 & 45)
223. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.149
224. "If the dream is the guardian of sleep, comedy is the guardian of reason in society because it makes possible confrontations of social relationships." (Duncan op. cit. pg.393)
225. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.144
226. ibid. pg.145
227. Sypher op. cit. pg.208
228. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.145
229. Legman op. cit. (1971) pg.65. One suspects that 'difficult' pupils, before they 'learn their place', have a far greater awareness of the ideological function of school as institution than is generally admitted.
230. One of Legman's examples: Three cockney kids are each given a penny by the teacher and told to spend it and tell the class what they got for it. Next day the first boy recites: "I bought two chocolates for my penny and I gave my sister one." Teacher: "Very good Alfred. And what did you get, Henry?" "I bought walnuts. I cracked them in half very carefully and I ate out the meats. Then I made sails out of cancelled postage-stamps that I soaked off envelopes, and put them on the walnut shells with matchsticks and I sold them to the other boys for boats. I got two farthings for them." "Oh, wonderful, Henry; that shows real self-reliant spirit, self-help, inventiveness and thrift. And what did you do, Willie?" "I bought a 'sossidge'. I untied one end and ate out the meat; then I gave the skin to my father - he used it on my mother - I shit in the skin - took it back to the butcher and told him it was bad - he bit it - said it was - and gave me my penny back." Willie hands the penny back to the teacher." (Legman op. cit. (1968) pg.69)
231. Legman op. cit. (1971) pg.66
232. ibid. pg.77
233. Althusser op. cit. pg.165

234. *ibid.* pg.164
235. cf. Ros Coward and John Ellis *op. cit.*, and Paul Q. Hirst 'Althusser and the Theory of Ideology' in 'Economy and Society' vol.5, no.4 (Nov. 1976)
236. Coward and Ellis *op. cit.* pg.75
237. G. Lenne, 'La Mort du Cinéma' (Eds. du Cerf, Paris, 1971) pg.12
238. Paul Q. Hirst, 'Problems and Advances in the Theory of Ideology' in 'Opening Session of the 1st Communist University of Cambridge (1976) pg.11
239. Terry Lovell, 'Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure' (BFI, 1980) pg.14
240. *ibid.* pg.15
241. Theweleit *op. cit.* pg.219
242. The 'State' nature of these ideological systems is briefly discussed above (pp.56-57)
243. Althusser *op. cit.* pg.164
244. Jackson *op. cit.* pg.61
245. *ibid.* pg.70
246. *ibid.* pg.72
247. Maurice Charney, 'Comedy High and Low' (Open University Pubs.) (1978)
248. Bergson *op. cit.* pg.112
249. Freud *op. cit.* (1976) pp.278-279
250. *ibid.* pg.279
251. Quoting Gautier, Bergson *op. cit.* pg.181. Jerry Palmer (*op. cit.*) argues that the logic of the absurd provides a means of understanding all forms of comedy.
252. Freud *op. cit.* (1976) pg.234
253. Brown *op. cit.* pg.256
254. Jackson *op. cit.* pg.144
255. "... even when the ambition to create nonsense rather than satire has been realized, it's possible for a friendly critic to argue that the nonsense is powerfully good for society." (Thompson *op. cit.* pg.29)
256. Jackson *op. cit.* pg.173

257. *ibid.* pg.175
258. This material is drawn from a seminar on 'The Sociology of Humour' held at the University of Aston in February 1983.
259. "Modern psychiatric ideology is an adaptation - to a scientific age - of the traditional ideology of Christian theology ... In short, whereas in the Age of Faith the ideology was Christian, the technology clerical, and the expert priestly, in the Age of Madness the ideology is medical, the technology clinical, and the expert psychiatric." (Thomas Szasz, 'Ideology and Insanity' (Pelican, 1970) pg.5) (cf. also Theweleit *op. cit.* pg.483, footnote 18)
260. The latter is a deviant activity because humour/the comedic fulfils a predominantly conservative function both on a social and on a personal level. We can also note that Richard Boston's newspaper report about some research on laughter-frequency among French people (cf. footnote 95 above) is written in a spirit of sustained levity.
261. Quoted in Robert Hewison, 'Monty Python: The Case Against' (Eyre Methuen, London, 1981) pg.78
262. Freud *op. cit.* (1976) pg.140
263. *ibid.* pg.141
264. *ibid.* pg.143
265. *ibid.* pg.144. "... Conscious language, even scientific language, also contains many metaphors and metonymies fashioned on the basis of profound psychological experiences common to everyone. Sexual experiences belong within this category, and it is often these which are brought into play by humour." (Lemaire *op. cit.* pg.43)
266. Freud *op. cit.* (1976) pg.145
267. cf. pg.41 ff. above, and also Jos von Ussel, 'L'Histoire de la Répression Sexuelle' (Laffont, Paris, 1966)
268. At the time of writing it is unclear whether versions of the film exist which contain this (scripted) material.
269. Freud *op. cit.* (1976) pg.194
270. *ibid.* pg.183
271. Neale *op. cit.* pg.30. It should be stressed at this point that we are tentatively accepting Freud's schema in its cultural specificity, the gender/power aspects of which still appear largely valid. It seems that women are usually less disposed to "tell jokes". This is anecdotally supported by my own questionnaire returns (cf. Section 6 and Appendix 1 below for details).

272. Neale op. cit. pg.30
273. ibid. pg.32
274. Bakhtin op. cit. pg.335
275. ibid. pg.335
276. ibid. pg.336 footnote
277. Colin McCabe, 'Those Golden Years' in 'Marxism Today' April 1988, pg.27
278. Psychoanalytic studies apart, Keaton is for Deleuze and Guattari "one of the greatest artists of the desiring-machine" (op. cit. pg.514)
279. "If the film can be said to have a theme, it has three. These are swallows, mud and the Grail." (Penelope Gilliatt, 'New Yorker' 5th May, 1975
280. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.141
281. Legman op. cit. (1971) pg.59. My translation.
282. Theweleit op. cit. pp.407-408
283. ibid. pg.405. "To create a platoon of killing machines, the raw recruits must be sanitised against death and develop a loathing for anything female" (review of Full Metal Jacket in 'New Socialist' October 1987, pg.44) For a stimulating (and troubling) exposition of male relations to women-as-dirt, cf. Andrea Dworkin 'Intercourse' (Arrow Books, London, 1988) pp.198-229
284. Legman op. cit. (1971) pg.68
285. "In the lasses' bog, somebody shit in the sink. It's like: You make me unlock the door, I'll shit in your sink ..." (pupil's remark in Bill Cormack 'The TV Audience: Seen but Not Heard' in 'Stills' Sept./Oct., 1983, pg.49)
286. Corbin op. cit. pp.218-219
287. Article on Gilliam, 'Tinkling Symbols', 'Guardian' 6th April 1977. Among bizarre instances of Monty Python humour prefiguring 'reality' is the sketch from one of the TV series (restaged in And Now for Something Completely Different) in which Terry Jones 'performs' 'Three Blind Mice' by striking a series of (specially trained) mice with a mallet. A recent newspaper report described how "an army instructor turned recruits ... into a "human xylophone", making them sing out notes as he beat them on the buttocks with a baseball bat ..." (Guardian 27.1.88)
288. Norman Holland, 'The Dynamics of Literary Response' (Oxford University Press, New York, 1968)

289. The relevance of these models (the quote is from Lacan) to Monty Python is discussed by Thompson, op. cit. pp.10-12. The sources are Melanie Klein, 'Some Reflections on the Oresteia' in 'Our Adult World and Other Essays' (William Heinemann Medical Books, London, 1963) and Jacques Lacan, 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' in 'Ecrits' (selection transl. A. Sheridan) (Tavistock, London, 1977)
290. Quoted in Thompson op. cit. pg.12
291. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.46
292. Neale op. cit. pg.36
293. Weber op. cit. pp.25-26
294. Jean-Paul Simon, 'Le Filmique et le Comique' (eds. Albatros, Paris, 1979)
295. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.109-113
296. ibid. pp.113-119
297. ibid. pp.120 ff.
298. ibid. pp.111-112
299. Eastman op. cit. pg.168
300. "Displacement onto something very small was later recognized by Freud as a characteristic mechanism in obsessional neurosis." (Freud op. cit. 1976 pg.121 translator's footnote)
301. Robin Wood, 'The American Family Comedy' in 'Wide Angle' vol. 3, no.2, (1979) pg.6
302. Neale op. cit. pg.39
303. Quoted Eastman op. cit. pg.126
304. Mast op. cit. pg.18
305. This should not be confused with the comedic consciousness in Brecht's own work, where the psychic energy which would normally be expended in laughter is diverted into thought. As Walter Benjamin comments, "there is no better starting-point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul." (quoted in Eagleton (1981) pg.157)
306. John Ellis, 'Made in Ealing' in 'Screen' vol.16, no.1 (Spring 1975)

307. In an article about Hollywood animation, Judith Williamson lends support to the view of Tashlin as practitioner of 'film-esprit'. His play with the medium was "... perfectly suited to comment on the medium itself (it is no coincidence that many of Tashlin's gags are about sight) ...". The article cites a number of instances of visual gags which fit Simon's 'visual joke' model. (Judith Williamson, 'Webfooted Friends' in 'New Statesman' 22nd April 1988 pp.29-30)
308. Neale op. cit. pg.41



Footnotes: Section 3

1. For biographical and institutional histories of Monty Python, cf. especially Roger Wilmut op. cit., Robert Hewison op. cit., John O. Thompson op. cit. For an interesting discussion of censorship, cf. Gershon Legman op. cit. (1949), Martin Baker, 'A Haunt of Fears' (Pluto Press 1984), Martin Baker (ed) 'The Video Nasties' (Pluto Press 1984)
2. Barclay, quoted Wilmut op. cit. pg.186
3. Gilliam quoted ibid. pg.186
4. Gilliam quoted ibid. pg.233
5. ibid. pg.196
6. We need here to guard against - or at least to recognize when we do indulge in - a kind of simplified psychoanalysis identified by Christian Metz as the 'nosographic approach'. Such an approach would "treat films as symptoms or as secondary manifestations that have been partially symptomatised, from which it is possible to 'ascend' to the neurosis of the film-maker (or the script-writer etc.). An undertaking very much in the classificatory spirit of medicine, even if in a moderate form: there will be obsessional, hysterical or perverse film-makers, and so on .../... neglect everything except the conscious and unconscious psychism of the film-maker as an individual ..." (Christian, Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier' transl. in 'Screen' vol.16, no.2, pp.32-33)
7. Michael Watts, 'The Times' 16th July 1981, quoted Thompson op. cit. pg.8
8. Quoted Bevis Hillier, 'Sunday Telegraph Supplement' 24th Oct. 1978, in Thompson op. cit. pg.45
9. Wilmut op. cit. pg.196
10. "... Gilliam's cartoons, with their style suggestive of Salvador Dali with a migraine ..." Wilmut op. cit. pg.204
11. Simon op. cit. pg.43
12. Jean-Paul Simon refers to a similar 'joke' created by Oskar Fischinger: "Dès 1924, Oskar Fischinger avec 'Pierrette' no.1 construisait également un dessin animé sur ce principe de déconstruction de la représentation par l'intervention directe du sujet de l'énonciation sous la forme de la main qui crée, efface et lutte contre le personnage qu'elle veut dessiner." (op. cit. pg.49)
13. Wilmut op. cit. pg.197
14. Gilliam, quoted Wilmut op. cit. pg.203
15. Gilliam, ibid. pg.203

16. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.203
17. Gilliam, quoted Wilmot op. cit. pg.203
18. Wilmot op. cit. pg.204
19. Jacques Aumont, 'Eisenstein: Notes Towards a Biography', in 'Camera Obscura' no.13/14 (1985) pg.69
20. Quoted John Walker, 'Sunday Express Magazine', 12th July 1981, in Thompson op. cit. pg.40
21. Gilliam, quoted Wilmot op. cit. pg.204
22. Lacan op cit. (1948) pg.12
23. Michael Watts, 'The Times' 16th July 1981, in Thompson op. cit. pg.8
24. Gilliam quoted Wilmot op. cit. pg.234
25. ibid. pp.234-235. Thus for example there is a 1511 woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien showing a family, with St. Anne opening the legs of a child to tickle its (male) genitals. (cf. Curjel's 'Holzschnitte Des Hans Baldung Grien' Blatt 9 & 10 (1924))
26. Sigmund Freud, 'Collected Papers II' (ed. J. Riviere and J. Strachey International Psychoanalytic Press, London, 1924-50) pp.45-50
27. Brown op. cit. pg.209
28. Harington op. cit. pg.34. This is from the 1814 edition. It is difficult, of course, to guess the 'status' of Harington's treatise. To some extent at least it must have been an elaborate joke.
29. cf. 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Book)' (1977) and 'Animations of Mortality' (1978) (both Eyre Methuen)
30. Bruckner and Finkielkraut op. cit. pg.43. Another way in which such fragmentation of the body may be appropriated is in the service of a 'post-modern body' which has left the unitary bourgeois individualist subject behind (cf. footnote (5.15) below for Eagleton's description of this). Eagleton also associates Deleuze and Guattari with the drift, consistent with post-modern ahistoricity, towards metaphysics and essentialism: "... the schizoid hero of the revolutionary drama is by definition unable to reflect upon his own condition, needing Parisian intellectuals to do it for him. The only 'revolution' conceivable, given such a protagonist, is disorder; and Deleuze and Guattari significantly use the two terms synonymously, in the most banal anarchist rhetoric." (Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' in 'New Left Review' no.152 (July/Aug. 1985) pg.69
31. Deleuze and Guattari op. cit. pg.44

32. Eagleton op. cit. (1981) pg.150
33. John Coleman, 'New Statesman' 17th July 1981, in Thompson op. cit. pg.28
34. Quoted 'The Guardian' 6th April 1977, in Thompson op. cit. pg.25
35. Gilliam quoted Hewison op. cit. pg.95
36. Hewison op. cit. pg.23
37. Wilmut op. cit. pg.217
38. Chapman, quoted Wilmut op. cit. pg.206
39. Interview for 'Rolling Stone' 13th November 1980, quoted Thompson op. cit. pg.51
40. Idle, quoted Hewison op. cit. pg.95
41. Interview for 'Rolling Stone' 13th November 1980, quoted Thompson op. cit. pg.52

Footnotes: Section 4

1. A.H. Pierce, 'The Subconscious Again' in 'Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Method' vol.5 (1908) quoted in Martin Orne 'On the Social Psychology of the Psychological Experiment' in 'American Psychologist' vol.17 (1962) pg.776
2. This term will be used in the broad sense outlined in Section 2, pg.63 above.
3. Richard Young and Margaret Frye, 'Some are Laughing, some are not - Why?' in 'Psychological Reports' vol.18 (1966) pg.747
4. Christopher Wilson, op. cit. pg.153. This book itself constitutes something of an overview of the state of research, and will furnish a number of references throughout this section.
5. Singer, Gollob and Levine, 'Mobilization of Inhibition and Enjoyment of Aggressive Humour' in 'Journal of Personality' vol.35 (1967) pg.563
6. Byrne seems to have done a lot of work in this area and is one of the most frequently referenced authors. His overview of the flight-or-fight field is in 'The repression-sensitisation scale: rationale, reliability and validity' in 'Journal of Personality' vol.29 (1961) pp.334-349
7. Among the material I have been unable to find are the following pieces of work:  
Donn Byrne, 'Drive level, response to humour, and the cartoon sequence effect' in 'Psychological Reports' vol.4 (1958) pp.439-442.  
Annie Reich, 'The Structure of the grotesque-comic sublimation', 'Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic' vol.13 (1949).  
D. Pomeranz, 'The Repression-sensitisation dimension and reactions to stress' unpublished doctoral dissertation University of Rochester USA (1962) (includes material on use of film in Mood Adjective Checklist studies).  
Vincent Nowlis, 'Some studies on the influence of films on mood and attitude' technical report no.7 (Jan. 1960), Office of Naval Research, Contract no. Nonr-668 (12).
8. Vincent Nowlis, 'Research with the Mood Adjective Checklist' in Tomkins and Izard (eds.) 'Affect, Cognition and Personality' (Tavistock 1966) pp.352-385. cf. also Vincent Nowlis and Russell Green, 'The Experimental Analysis of Mood' (Technical Report no.3, Office of Naval Research) contract no. Nonr.668 (12) (1957)
9. Thus, for example, John Doris and Ella Fierman: "The S's vocal and facial responses to the cartoons were rated by an examiner on a 6-point scale from disapproval to pronounced pleasure." 'Humour and Anxiety' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.53 (1956) pg.59

10. Wilson op. cit. pg.3
11. ibid. pg.4
12. ibid.
13. ibid.
14. ibid.
15. Walter O'Connell 'The Adaptive Function of Wit and Humour' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.61 (1960) pg.265
16. Orne op. cit. pg.780
17. Young and Frye op. cit. pg.752. For an earlier discussion of the effect of group/individual reception-situations for humour, cf. also Perl op. cit.
18. Harry Gollob and Jacob Levine, 'Distraction as a factor in the Enjoyment of Aggressive Humour' in 'Journal of Personality and Social Psychology' vol.5 (1967) pg.371
19. These sources are among those proving difficult to locate. The latter one is available on microfilm at the British Library. Cattell and Luborsky, 'Personality Factors in Response to Humour' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.42 (1947) pp.402-421  
Redlich, Levine and Sohler, 'Mirth Response Test: Preliminary Report on a Psychodiagnostic technique utilizing Dynamics of Humour' in 'American Journal of Orthopsychiatry' vol.21 (1951) pp.717-734
20. John Strickland, 'The Effect of Motivation Arousal on Humour Preference' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.59 (1958) pg.278
21. O'Connell op. cit. pg.265
22. Strickland op. cit. pg.278
23. ibid. pg.279
24. Donn Byrne, 'Some Inconsistencies in the Effect of Motivation Arousal on Human Preferences' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.62 (1961) pg.158
25. O'Connell op. cit. pg.265
26. Earl Dworkin and Jay Efran, 'The Angered: Their Susceptibility to Varieties of Humour' in 'Journal of Personality and Social Psychology' vol.6 (1967) pp.233-236

27. The original paper was by C.D. Morgan and H.A. Murray, 'A Method for Investigating Fantasies: The Thematic Apperception Test' in 'Archive of Neurology and Psychiatry' vol.34 (1935) pp.289-306. Further publications central to the development of TAT include:  
     H.A. Murray, 'Explorations in Personality' (Oxford Press, New York 1938) and 'Thematic Apperception Test Manual' (Harvard U.P. Cambridge Mass 1943)  
     Silvan Tomkins, 'The Thematic Apperception Test' (Grune and Stratton, New York 1947)
28. Gardner Lindzey, 'Thematic Apperception Test: Interpretive Assumptions and related Empirical Evidence' in 'Psychological Bulletin' vol.49 (1952) pg.1
29. Calvin Hall and Gardner Lindzey, 'Theories of Personality' (John Wiley and Sons 1978 pg.235)
30. George Stricker, 'The Construction and Partial Validation of an Objectively Scorable Apperception Test' in 'Journal of Personality' vol.30 (1962) pp.51-62
31. *ibid.* pg.59
32. G.S. Blum 'The Blacky Pictures: a technique for the exploration of personality dynamics' (New York Psychological Corporation 1950)
33. Esther B. Frankel, 'An Experimental Study of 4 analytic themes of Humour' (University of Michigan unpublished Ph.D. thesis 1953) pg.42
34. Nowlis *op. cit.* (1966) pg.356
35. *ibid.* pg.354
36. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.106. The reference is to David Singer, 'Aggression Arousal, Hostile Humour, Catharsis' in 'Journal of Personality and Social Psychology' (Monograph Supplement) Jan. 1968 (8) pp.1-14
37. Nowlis *op. cit.* (1966) pg.356. The ten additional words were careful, earnest, meticulous, serious, hungry, in pain, intoxicated, lustful, sexy, thirsty.
38. *ibid.* pg.360
39. D.M. McNair and M. Lorr, 'An Analysis of Mood in Neurotics' 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.69 (1964) pp.620-627
40. M. Zuckerman, 'The Development of an Affect Adjective Check List for the measuring of Anxiety' in 'Journal of Counselling Psychology' vol.24 (1960) pp.457-462
41. R.B. Cattell and I.H. Scheier, 'The Meaning and Measurement of Neuroticism and Anxiety' (Ronald, New York 1961)

42. Details and references in Nowlis op. cit. (1966) pp.375-377
43. ibid. pg.384
44. O'Connell op. cit. pg.264
45. ibid. pg.264. An interesting precursor of SAI was a method described by R.R. Sears in 'Survey of Objective Studies of Psychoanalytic Concepts' (Social Science Research Council) (New York 1942), in which degree of repression was calculated from the disparity between self-assessment and assessment by others.
46. One of Milan Kundera's characters speculates about the uniqueness of life and of history:  
 "la vie humaine n'a lieu qu'une seule fois et nous ne pourrions jamais vérifier quelle était la bonne et quelle était la mauvaise décision, parce que, dans toute situation, nous ne pouvons décider qu'une seule fois. Il ne nous est pas donné une deuxième, une troisième, une quatrième vie pour que nous puissions comparer différentes décisions."  
 "'Einmal ist keinmal'. Une fois ne compte pas. Une fois c'est jamais."  
 Milan Kundera, 'L'Insoutenable Légèreté de L'Etre' (nrf Gallimard, Paris 1984) pp.279-280
47. Wilson op. cit. pg.68
48. O'Connell op. cit. pg.265
49. Wilson op. cit. pg.95. In fact Freud does at one point raise the problem of quantification: "I refer to the concept that in mental functions something is to be distinguished - a quota of affect or sum of excitation - which possesses all the characteristics of a quantity (though we have no means of measuring it)" S. Freud 'The Neuro-psychoses of Defence' (Standard Ed. vol.III ed. Strachey, pg.60)
50. The graphical idea is developed by Wilson op. cit. pp.95-98. The assumed linearity of the scales for probability of release from repression and potential amusement is, of course, not unproblematic; we shall, however, leave this particular problem aside for the time being.
51. Wilson op. cit. pg.95
52. ibid. pg.21
53. The term 'incongruity' is being deliberately stretched here to cover far more than was intended in the original term 'incongruity theory' (e.g. Patricia Keith-Spiegel's typology of 'theories'; cf. pg.72 above).
54. D.I. Kenny, 'The contingency of Humour Appreciation on the stimulus-confirmation of Joke Ending Expectations' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.51 (1955) pp.644-648

55. M. Godkewitch, 'Verbal, Exploratory and Physiological Responses to Stimulus Properties underlying Humour' (unpublished Ph.D thesis University of Toronto, 1974)
56. Wilson op. cit. pg.33
57. G. Nerhardt, 'Humour and Inclination to Laugh: Emotional Reaction to Stimuli of Different Divergence from Range of Expectancy' in 'Scandinavian Journal of Psychology' vol.11 (1970) pp.185-195
58. Wilson op. cit. pg.34
59. S. Ertel, 'Eine Psychologische Theorie des Komischen', (Habilitation Vortrag University of Munster 1968)
60. Wilson op. cit. pp.36-37
61. ibid. pg.65
62. ibid. pg.73
63. ibid. pg.126
64. Gollob and Levine op. cit. pg.372
65. Spiegel, Brodtkin and Keith-Spiegel, 'Unacceptable impulses, Anxiety and the Appreciation of Cartoons' in 'Journal of Projective Techniques and Personality Assessment' vol.33 (1969) pp.154-159  
G.C. Rosenwald, 'The Relation of Drive Discharge to the Enjoyment of Humour' in 'Journal of Personality' vol.32 (1964) pp.682-697  
Grizwold and Scodel, 'Some Psychological Correlates of Humour Preferences' in 'Journal of Consulting Psychology' vol.20 (1956) pg.42
66. Wilson op. cit. pp.99-100
67. Byrne op. cit. (1961) pg.158 footnote.
68. Wilson op. cit. pp.101-102. The reference is to Epstein and Smith, 'Repression and Insight as related to Reaction to Cartoons' in 'Journal of Consulting Psychology' vol.20 (1956) pp.391-395
69. The differences between the experiments are discussed by Byrne Op. cit. (1961) (footnote 4.24 above)
70. O'Connell op. cit. pg.263. He also refers to the common "erroneous implication that psychoanalytic theory considers that the neurotic is not hostile" (pg.268)
71. ibid. pg.263
72. Rosenwald op. cit. cited in Wilson op. cit. pg.100



73. O'Connell op. cit. pg.268
74. Singer, Gollob and Levine op. cit. pg.563
75. ibid. pg.567
76. Wilson op. cit. pg.105
77. Freud op. cit. (1976) pg.166
78. Strickland op. cit. pg.280
79. ibid. pg.280
80. Wilson op. cit. pg.107
81. Young and Frye op. cit. pg.751
82. The transmission of March 29th 1986 contains a particularly good instance of direct-to-camera provocation.
83. Strickland op. cit. pg.279
84. ibid. pg.278
85. Byrne op. cit. (1961) (footnote 4.24 above) pg.158
86. ibid. pg.159
87. O'Connell op. cit. pg.263
88. ibid. pg.265
89. Adjustment scores were obtained by means of Self-Activity Inventory (SAI) (O'Connell op. cit. pg.264, cf. also pg.186 above)
90. ibid. pg.264
91. Not that it may not be true; it would just have been an unexpected - and rather tortuous - piece of evidence!
92. O'Connell op. cit. pg.269
93. ibid. pg.268
94. Dworkin and Efran op. cit. pg.233
95. O'Connell op. cit. pg.263
96. Donn Byrne, 'The Relation between Humour and the Expression of Hostility' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.53 (1956) pp.84-89
97. Singer op. cit. pg.1
98. Wilson op. cit. pg.110

99. *ibid.* pg.228
100. *ibid.* pg.151
101. For a discussion of various possible strategies for reappropriating 'pleasure' for the left, cf. Jameson *op. cit.* pp.1-14
102. cf. Freud (1976) pp.47-131
103. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.115
104. *ibid.* pg.129
105. *ibid.* pg.130
106. Doris and Fierman *op. cit.* pg.61
107. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.125
108. *ibid.* pg.125
109. Legman, *op. cit.* (1968)
110. Wilson *op. cit.* pp.172-173
111. *ibid.* pg.180
112. cf. Klapp *op. cit.* pp.157-162 and Boston *op. cit.* (1974)
113. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.181
114. *ibid.* pg.229
115. It is true that there are a number of pertinent differences between Bruce's case and that of the Pythons. Live performance involves a more 'direct' relation with the audience than literature, sound recordings, TV or film. The Monty Python team all came from social (and, mostly, educational) backgrounds where prudence would have been a cardinal virtue, and despite the wilful kicking against convention of much of the Monty Python material, the residual sensibleness of playing safe by the Law (if not by Aunt Sallies such as the BBC) was only to be expected. It is also worth noting that, since the Obscene Publications Acts of 1959 and 1964 do not cover film and TV, the various brushes over 'obscenity', 'blasphemy' and 'excessive violence' took place within the relatively protected confines of the BBC or else took the form of civilized exchanges with the British Board of Film Censors!
116. For details of these sketches and a detailed review of Monty Python's experiences with the Law and with censorship, see Hewison. *op. cit.*
117. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'On Joking Relationships' in 'Africa' vol.13 (1940) pp.195-210

118. Wilson op. cit. pg.145
119. ibid. pg.145. He is referring to La Fave, 'Superiority, Enhanced Self-Esteem, and Perceived-Incongruity Humour Theory' in Chapman and Foot (eds.) 'Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications' (Wiley, London 1976)
120. Wilson op. cit. pg.230
121. ibid. pp.189-225
122. Jonathan Gutman and Robert Priest, 'When is Aggression Funny?' in 'Journal of Personality and Social Psychology' vol.12 (1969) pp.60-65
123. Gutman and Priest's results, which are otherwise of interest, must be compromised by the use of only four jokes (one of each type) and by the possibility that "Gutman and Priest's manipulations of the characters of the butts were weak, and probably had limited relevance for the subjects. The characters in the jokes were fictional and were depicted tersely." (Wilson op. cit. pg.205)
124. Gutman and Priest op. cit. pg.62
125. ibid. pg.163
126. Wilson op. cit. pg.138
127. ibid. pg.205
128. R.C. Mannell, 'Social Injustice, Retaliatory Equity, and Vicarious Superiority Humour'. Paper presented at International Conference on Humour and Laughter, Cardiff 1976
129. Gutman and Priest op. cit. pg.63
130. Wilson op. cit. pg.133. The other references are to William James, 'The Principles of Psychology' (vol.1) (Henry Holt New York 1890) and Wolff, Smith and Murray, 'The Psychology of Humour I: A Study of Responses to Race-Disparagement Jokes' in 'Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology' vol.28 (1934) pp.341-365
131. Wilson op. cit. pg.136, referring to Zillman and Cantor, 'Resentment towards Victimised Protagonists and Severity of Misfortunes they suffer as Factors in Humour Appreciation' in 'Journal of Experimental Research in Personality' vol.6 (1973) pp.321-329
132. Wilson op. cit. pg.205
133. Gutman and Priest op. cit. pg.64
134. O'Connell op. cit. pg.263
135. ibid. pg.265

136. *ibid.* pg.267
137. *ibid.* pg.268
138. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.125
139. *ibid.* pg.121
140. *ibid.* pg.121
141. For details of the jokes used, cf. Gutman and Priest *op. cit.* pg.61
142. One of the 'high-aggression' cartoons is described: "A husband and wife are fighting viciously in the presence of two guests. The woman guest leans over and whispers to her husband: I've heard they don't get along very well" (Gollob and Levine *op. cit.* pg.370)
143. One example of such humour is the extracts from a 'Kipper Kids' performance which turn up in Fassbinder's Teater in Trance (1981) and in Werner Schroeter's Dress Rehearsal (1980). We see a naked man and woman performing a comedy act on stage, surrounded by and liberally covered in what looks like shit. The verbal humour is elaborate and arguably funny in its witty use of intellectual material.
144. Research becomes much more complicated in something like satire, where there is a very real possibility that (large) parts of the audience may radically misinterpret the aim of the humour, or indeed fail to detect any humorous intent at all. "One way the satirist may fail ... is by making a fool of the audience rather than the intended victim" (Wilson, *op. cit.* pp. 199-200). Satire can also be (mis)appropriated by its very targets via 'oppositional reading'. Thus in France Guy Bedos was obliged to stop performing his caricature of anti-Algerian racism when the act became very popular among racists! In a similar way the Alf Garnett of BBC TV's Till Death Us Do Part became uncontrollably popular, as has, more recently, the Loadsamoney character created by Harry Enfield on Saturday Night Live. The counterproductivity of the latter media image was the subject of a Guardian editorial of 30th April 1988.
145. Doris and Fierman *op. cit.* pg.60. The footnote explains, "Understanding of the Cobean cartoon required that one be able to recognize the appearance of an oriental eunuch. The Kovarsky cartoon required that one have some familiarity with the Cobean 'undressing' theme."
146. Gollob and Levine *op. cit.* pg.371
147. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.128
148. Nowlis *op. cit.* (1966) pg.370
149. Orne *op. cit.* pg.778

150. *ibid.* pg.779
151. *ibid.* pg.779
152. This is another danger of the common practice of setting up an experiment to validate a hypothesis (cf. pg.224 above).
153. Orne *op. cit.* pg.780
154. Gollob and Levine *op. cit.* pg.371
155. Wilson *op. cit.* pg.131
156. *ibid.* pg.202
157. O'Connell *op. cit.* pg.267

Footnotes: Section 5

1. Radway op. cit. cf. footnote no.4 of Introduction.
2. In this I am probably already distancing myself (for pragmatic reasons?) from much of the kind of research considered in Section 4 above.
3. Karl Erik Rosengren and Swen Windahl, 'Mass Media Consumption as a Functional Alternative' in Denis McQuail (ed.) 'Sociology of Mass Communications' (Penguin 1979) pg.167
4. Radway op. cit. pg.89
5. ibid. pg.91
6. If the women studied by Radway claimed to have been "transformed by their hobby" (op. cit. pg.213), this certainly brings into play some notion of the effectivity of the reading material and the women's conscious use of the novels. (cf. also footnote 5.57 below)
7. Morley op. cit. (1980 I) pg.2
8. James Halloran (ed.) 'The Effects of Television' (Panther, London 1970) pg.17
9. ibid. pp.18-19. Thus a BBC audience research questionnaire sent out to viewers to assess responses to the 1975 'Days of Hope' series "... stemmed from the concept of the audience as active and selective, manipulating rather than being manipulated by the programme's message" (BBC Audience Research Unit, 'Communication: A Case Study of 'Days of Hope'' in 'Annual Review of BBC Audience Research Findings' no.4 1976/1977 (BBC 1978) pg.63
10. 'The text' here refers to the ensemble of discourses constituting the artefact (film, book etc.), heuristically distinct from the viewing/reading subject. No post-structuralist grand texts here!
11. cf. (among a mass of literature) Paul Willemen, 'Voyeurism, the Look and Dwoskin' in Afterimage 6 (Summer 1976), Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Screen vol.16, no.3 (1975), Jean-Louis Baudry 'The Apparatus' in Camera Obscura no.1 (1976), and the work of Stephen Heath. It is clear that the relation between reader and literary text is of quite another order.
12. Colin McCabe 'Realism and Cinema: notes on some Brechtian Theses' in Screen vol.15, no.2 (1974)
13. Ian Connell and Richard Paterson, 'The Politics of Viewing' (compilation paper for BFI Summer School 1981) pg.7
14. ibid. pg.7

15. McCabe op. cit. (1976) pg.25. It may be argued that the bourgeois individual subject is itself in the process of being left behind. Though he also argues for the continued relevance of that subject, Terry Eagleton describes another process: "... it is surely arguable that late capitalism has deconstructed such a subject much more efficiently than meditations about 'écriture'. As post-modernist culture attests, the contemporary subject may be less the strenuous monadic agent of an earlier phase of capitalist ideology than a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority ... The 'unified subject' looms up in this light as more and more of a shibboleth or straw target, a hangover from an older liberal epoch of capitalism, before technology and consumerism scattered our bodies to the winds as so many bits and pieces of reified technique, appetite, mechanical operation or reflex of desire." (op. cit. (1985) pg.71)
16. McCabe op. cit. (1976) pg.25
17. ibid. pg.21
18. cf. Colin McCabe 'The Politics of Separation' in 'Screen' vol.16, no.4 (1975)
19. It is within such a perspective of non-hierarchisation of discourses that 'The Nightcleaners' has been thus described "... a film which radically challenges the assumptions behind this practice of cinema ... undoubtedly the most important political film to have been made in this country." (Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain - the Independent Political Film' in Screen vol.16, no.4 (1975) pg.104
20. Sylvia Harvey, 'May '68 and Film Culture' (BFI 1978) pg.78
21. Among them Richard Collins and Vincent Porter, 'WDR and Arbeiterfilm: Fassbinder, Ziewer and others' (BFI 1981) pg.102
22. Hardy, Johnston and Willemen, quoted in Connell and Paterson op. cit. pg.10
23. David Morley, 'Texts, Readers, Subjects' in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.) 'Culture, Media, Language' (Hutchinson, London 1980) pg.171
24. "Ce 'moi' qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes, de codes infinis" (Roland Barthes, S/Z (eds. du Seuil, Paris 1970)) pg.16
25. Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the TV Discourse' (occasional paper, CCCS Birmingham 1973). David Morley 1980 (footnote 5 in introduction)
26. We can note here the way in which a number of Radway's respondents ignored, discarded or mutilated books which did not conform to their preferred decoding strategies (Radway op. cit. pg.70 ff.)

27. Martin Kohli, Barbara Dippelhofer-Stiem, Barbara Pommerehne, 'Workers watch 'Workers' Films'' in Leviathan vol.4, no.3 (1976) (trans. Sheila Johnston) pg.40
28. Radway op. cit. pg.62
29. ibid. pg.86
30. ibid. pg.89
31. ibid. pg.210
32. ibid. pg.7
33. For Deleuze and Guattari's schizo, any meaning is possible. "It's anything you want it to be, as long as it works." (op. cit. pg.109) Meaning is thus nothing other than use. "How it works is the sole question." (pg.180) More precisely, "The exegetical meaning (what is said about the thing) is only one element among others, and is less important than the operative use (what is done with the thing) ..." (op. cit. pg.181)
34. Francesco Casetti, 'Looking for the Spectator' in Iris vol.1, no.2 (1983) pg.25 (footnote)
35. ibid. pg.22. Some of the difficulties of the semiological model of encoding/decoding are discussed by David Morley, 'The Nationwide Audience: a Critical Postscript' in 'Screen Education' (no.39, Summer 1981) and will be taken up below.
36. Radway op. cit. pg.11
37. Two particularly useful texts appear to be Jane Tompkins (ed.), 'Reader Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-Structuralism' (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980) and Stanley Fish 'Is There a Text in the Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities' (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1980)
38. David Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.11
39. Stuart Hall et al, 'Recent Developments in English Studies' in 'Culture, Media and Language' (Hutchinson 1980)
40. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.11
41. S. Suleiman and I. Crossman (eds.) 'The Reader in the Text' (Princeton University Press 1980) pg.32
42. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.3
43. Radway op. cit. pg.86
44. ibid. pg.10



45. *ibid.* pg.9. This kind of exercise can then be seen as a contribution to "the ethnography of reading" (Morley *op. cit.* (1981) pg.13)
46. Jean Rouch, quoted in Mick Eaton, 'Anthropology - Reality - Cinema' (BFI 1979) pg.48
47. Eaton *ibid.* pg.48
48. Radway *op. cit.* pg.78
49. *ibid.* pg.210. "The world passes through the lens of our cognition; whatever is necessary and hence foundation-worthy in it, owes this status to the lens, not to itself: so philosophy must scrutinize the lens, our selves, our cognitive powers" (Ernest Gellner, 'Legitimation of Belief' (Cambridge University Press 1974) pg.29
50. Radway *op. cit.* pg.210
51. Put differently, there is no possibility of a truly scientific discourse since this would only be possible for a subject outside ideology: no such human subject exists. (cf. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the State' *op. cit.* pp.159-162)
52. Radway *op. cit.* pg.50
53. *ibid.* pg.120
54. *op. cit.* pg.11
55. *op. cit.* pg.189
56. cf. McCabe *op. cit.* (1974)
57. Radway *op. cit.* pg.189. With the 'as if' we are again in the realms of ideology as unconscious. "This means that they are subjects because they are constituted 'as if' they constituted themselves ... the subject lives 'as if' it were a subject, and through the 'as if' it really does have a determinate effect." (Paul Q. Hirst, *op. cit.* (1976) pp.12-13 cf. footnote 2.238 above). 'Determinate effects' can be said to be present in the case of the romance readers if, as they claim, they have been "transformed by their hobby" (Radway *op. cit.* pg.213)
58. Radway *op. cit.* pg.189
59. George F. Custen, 'Fiction as Truth: Viewer Use of Data about the 'Real' World' (summary article based on unpublished thesis)
60. "For the viewer, constructing the story takes precedence; the effects of the text are registered, but its causes go unremarked ... The spectator simply has no concepts or terms for the textual elements and systems that shape responses. It is the job of theory to construct them, the job of analysis to show them at work." (David Bordwell, 'Narrative in the Fiction Film' (Methuen 1985) pg.48)

61. Radway op. cit. pg.190
62. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.5
63. Radway op. cit. pg.190
64. Barthes op. cit. pg.10
65. Radway op. cit. pg.197
66. ibid. pp.134-139
67. ibid. pg.138
68. ibid. pg.62
69. ibid. pg.86
70. ibid. pg.210
71. ibid. pg.210
72. ibid. pg.199
73. ibid. pg.54
74. ibid. pg.187
75. ibid. pp.75 ff., 94-95
76. ibid. pg.184
77. ibid. pg.100
78. ibid. pg.117
79. Midwinter, op. cit. pg.14. This is also reminiscent, though in a more user-active mode, of the kind of 'pessimistic mass-media thesis' common in the 1950s. Thus "... the term 'narcotizing dysfunction' was coined by Merton and Lazarsfeld to refer to an apparent tendency of audiences to accept the vicarious media experience as a substitute for actually doing anything about social or political problems" (Denis McQuail, Jay Blumler, J.R. Brown, 'The Audience of Mass Communications' in McQuail op. cit. pg.139)
80. Radway op. cit. pg.186
81. ibid. pg.191
82. On the testability in general of theories of knowledge, cf. Gellner op. cit. pp.32-39. In considering the Marxist-materialist alternative to Hegelian idealism, (the latter "actually excludes the very idea of prediction and thus, indirectly, of testing"), Gellner observed that "Marxists do not improve on this aspect of Hegelianism. They merely replace the mystique of contemplation by a mystique of 'practice', the

name for a most elusive but conspicuously uncheckable kind of validation of knowledge" (pg.36)

83. Radway op. cit. pg.212
84. This is a reference to some work which originally formed part of this section but which was jettisoned. Rosengren and Windahl (op. cit. cf. footnote 5.3 above) developed a typology of methods of need-satisfaction, where functional alternatives are the different (alternative) ways in which a given need may be satisfied. Rosengren and Windahl used their model to look at the ways in which individual and social (environmental) influences could define the ways in which television fulfils needs, in particular the need for social interaction. Motives for seeking functional alternatives could then include 'compensation', 'escape', 'vicarious experience'. In order to ascertain which functional alternative television was being used for, it would then be necessary to situate the subject(s) both psychoanalytically and socially.
85. Radway op. cit. pg.221
86. ibid. pg.217
87. ibid. pg.217
88. Gellner op. cit. pg.34
89. Radway op. cit. pg.217
90. ibid. pg.10
91. ibid. pg.50
92. ibid. pg.78
93. ibid. pg.61
94. ibid. pg.62
95. ibid. pg.48
96. Custen op. cit. pg.9
97. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.9
98. Radway op. cit. pg.60. She is here discussing some general reading statistics emerging from the work of Yankelovich, Skelly and White.
99. Radway op. cit. pp.135-140
100. ibid. pg.158
101. ibid. pg.158

102. Though this remains an attractive approach, the practical obstacles would seem insurmountable in a study such as this. cf. footnote 84 above.
103. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.10
104. Colin McCabe op. cit. (1975) pg.51
105. Morley op. cit. (1981) pg.12
106. ibid. pg.13
107. Custen op. cit. pg.8
108. Casetti op. cit. pg.29

Footnotes: Section 6

1. This broad body of work would include that of David Morley (op. cit. (1980 I) and 1986; cf. footnote 5 in introduction), Stuart Hall, e.g. 'Culture, the media, and the ideological effect' in Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott (eds.) 'Mass Communication and Society' (Arnold, London 1977), and the BFI monograph on Coronation Street (1981).
2. David Buckingham, 'Children and Television: an Overview of the Research' (BFI Summer School paper 1987) pg.5
3. ibid. pg.6
4. ibid. pg.8
5. Robert Hodge and David Tripp, 'Children and Television' (Polity Press 1986) pp.41-42. The exemplary work carried out by Hodge and Tripp on how non-verbal responses modify what is said by respondents is the kind of thing which was beyond my means in this research. It was clear in listening to the discussion tapes that there were points at which a video record of the respondents would have given interesting insights into how/why conversations followed the paths they did. Instances in which groups of respondents generated 'tendentious' humour of their own would have been especially interesting to observe. Thus for example in relation to toilet humour one respondent said, "... you know people still find it funny; whether it's an area that people still feel embarrassed about and therefore they need that release periodically ..." (loud laughter!) (Appendix 4 pg.104)
6. Buckingham, op. cit. pg.14
7. ibid. pg.16
8. For a discussion of Radway's work and its significance for film/TV studies which makes many of the points raised in Section 5 above, cf. Ann Gray: 'Reading the Audience', 'Screen' vol.28 no.3 (Summer 87). Thus "... her methodological intervention is of tremendous importance to studies of the consumption of popular ... culture in general ..." (pg.34). For a further discussion of the usefulness of Radway's approach (and some of the problems thrown up by her method) cf. Valerie Walkerdine 'Video Replay: families, films and fantasy' in V. Burgin, J. Donald, C. Kaplan (eds.) 'Formations of Fantasy' (Methuen London/New York 1986)
9. The final page of each questionnaire enabled respondents to select the most convenient date/time from the list. Questionnaires prefixed 'L' were sent to respondents who were likely to attend a screening at Tavistock Square; the dates/times were those for which the resource had been booked. Questionnaires prefixed 'H' were sent to local respondents with a list of dates/times at which they could come to a session at my home.

10. For an attempted content-analysis of the Boulting brothers' I'm All Right Jack, in which some 1300 'comedic elements' were identified, cf. J. Udris op. cit. (footnote 2 in introduction)
11. The book of the film, 'Monty Python's The Meaning of Life' (Methuen London 1983) contains for the most part a fairly accurate text and a lot of nice pictures.
12. cf. pp.13 & 165-167 above. cf. also Theweleit (op. cit.) on Luther's unwitting complicity in the development of modern forms of repression, of new ways of damming the streams of desire: "Luther tanned his own hide with a whip in an attempt to acquire the kind of armour the Western 'ego' now needed as a habitation." (pg.322)
13. The executives in this meeting include some of the Python team, and are given names in the text of the book of the film. As we have noted, all the executives in the 'Crimson Permanent Assurance' section are played by non-Pythons. Oddly, however, while there is a credit list for the CPA section, there are no credits at the end of the book for the executive meeting sequence in the body of the film.
14. cf. Sections 4 and 5 above for a more detailed discussion of the problems associated with different modes of audience research.
15. We can note here one or two of the problems encountered in running such a discussion. Having made a prior decision not to 'censor' myself, and to participate, to some extent at least, in the discussion, I found that there were occasions when the result was a kind of 'prompting' (don't you think that ...). Thus on anticipation: "It was noticeable as well that you actually laughed before the film started .../... but I noticed that there was a laugh as soon as that first title, shot came up ..." (App.4 pg.3); on performance: "... something you mentioned before as well, was the performance ..." (App.4 pg. 12); on the idea of a 'good joke': "... but it can also be I think something to do with ... how good a joke it is ..." (App.4 pg.14); on shock laughter with regard to the use of the word 'penis': "... I still want to pursue it a little further ... do you feel that just mentioning 'penis' or whatever would raise a laugh? ...". The significance of respondents' comments needs (in some instances) to be seen in this light. It is also noticeable that I spoke rather more on the first (trial run) tape, with H1. There was also some explicit discussion of the 'experimental' context: "... do you think the fact that you were part of an experiment had any effect on your appreciation ..." (App.4 pg.32), "... what effect do you think watching it here in this context has ..." (App.4 pg.91). On a few occasions some details were revealed about the object of the research. Generally this tended to happen near the end of a session (with H11 and 13, App.4 pg.62, and with L13 and 16, App.4 pp.77/78), and in one case the respondents were interested in learning more about Freud's joke/comic distinction! (with L5, L12 and L14, App.4 pp.110/111).

16. cf. pp.51-53 above, and Pierre Bourdieu 'Distinction: A Critique of the Judgement of Taste' (transl. R. Nice, Harvard U.P. Cambridge, Mass, 1984). Bourdieu has shown how difficult it is to sift through the demography of socioeconomics/class and of educational/cultural preferences to arrive at a satisfactory index of cultural capital. For a critique of Bourdieu's work in this field, cf. John Frow, 'Accounting for Tastes: Some Problems in Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture' in 'Cultural Studies' vol.1 no.1 (Jan.'87) pp.59-73
17. For a fuller account of the questionnaire data, cf. Appendix 1.
18. Throughout the remainder of this section, all references to Appendix 4 will consist of the respondent number followed by the page number in the Appendix. In the interests of brevity, also, not all relevant/appropriate respondent comments will be quoted in full, and 'hedges' ("you know", "sort of" etc.) will generally be omitted. My own interventions will be signalled by 'Q'.
19. cf. footnote 6.14 above, and Appendix 4 pg.110-111
20. Eastman op. cit. pg.168
21. "It is only when exaggeration goes beyond some humanly reasonable bounds that it makes you want to laugh" (Eastman op. cit. pg.169)
22. It is worth reflecting in this context on how comfortable we feel with gross caricatures of political and other figures with whom we feel empathy; (cf. pp.219-220 above on "affiliated objects").
23. The degree of playfulness or 'seriousness' can, as we have noted (pg.91 above), be seen as an index of the effectiveness of a satire. It is only at the moments that Monty Python/Meaning of Life is not playful at all and shows contempt for its target that it could be said to qualify as satire.
24. The psychoanalytic argument apart, the whole notion of generic pleasure (and indeed the very definition of 'genre') would appear to depend upon innovation within a framework of secure repetitive convention.
25. Thus for example respondent L17, while not really enjoying Meaning of Life, felt that her interest had been sustained because she "... like(s) the personas of the people in Monty Python anyway, I like seeing them in other things ... like Eric Idle in The Mikado, even though I don't know them at all ..." (L17,23). Another respondent found Michael Palin attractive. (L12,106)
26. Richard Dyer 'Stars' (BFI 1982) pg.151
27. ibid. pg.152
28. ibid. pg.153

29. As was noted by another respondent (L16), the parodic reading of this sequence is also linked to recent (1987) news reports of illegal organ trafficking in South America.
30. Wilmot op. cit. pg.213
31. As noted above (pp.93-94), it is possible to analyse the deformations of a primary scopophilia in a psychoanalytic framework. There is no attempt to do so here.
32. This term is not being used here in its more precise psychoanalytic sense, according to which identification is a structural effect of a certain kind of text, and is fundamentally unconscious. Such identification would, of course, have been occurring in the case of Meaning of Life, but a proper analysis is not possible here.
33. "Walking down a street in Copenhagen he saw a very well-dressed conventional couple parading arm in arm, with them was a snowy-white poodle with a plaster stuck over its bottom. 'Amazing, isn't it - when I draw that people will say "ah, that's not life"'" (Guardian, 6.4.1977, quoted Thompson op. cit. pg.25). The poodle with the plaster over its bottom duly appears in Brazil.
34. cf. pp.110, 116-120 & 136-138 above. There were points during the recorded tapes at which audible amusement/laughter seemed to be in response specifically to an evoked or remembered absurdity. Some discussion of absurdity may also/already have been dealt with under the 'exaggeration' heading (cf.pp. 298-300 above)
35. Meaning of Life contains relatively little of Gilliam's flights-of-fancy animation which, in the TV programmes, had been an important contribution and had conferred a strong excremental flavour. It will therefore not be possible to follow up some of the speculations thrown up in pp.158-168 above.
36. It is possible to debate whether humour aimed at Jews is 'racist'; the characteristics upon which such humour is based are usually religious rather than racial. Here I shall only note that one Jewish respondent accepted the term. "... it's all right, I can say it, I'm Jewish ..." (L6,89)
37. 'Derek and Clive' tapes and records were recorded around the late 1960's by Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. For these they assumed the characters of Pete and Dud (from their Not Only But Also TV series) and proceeded to drink (more than) liberally. In the resulting material the comedic effect of absurdity tends to be sacrificed in exchange for the shock value of straightforward obscenity. It would be very interesting to study comedic obscenity in terms of the necessary conditions for the abandonment of joke-structures. Speculation about possible audiences for such material does then introduce again the real and symbolic 'profits' which such obscene humour may produce, and the risks of investing obscene cultural capital.



38. We should note two modalities in the use of the word 'shock'. It can be employed in a social/moral sense: "... it should shock me ... it doesn't shock me ... (etc.)" (L16,69-70) or "... I was shocked, I mean I shouldn't have been, I'm ideologically sound ..." (L5,93). But the word can also refer to a visceral, more or less physiological trauma. Although in any particular instance the two senses are likely both to be present, in what follows we shall try to concentrate on the latter, more physically immediate, sense.
39. Freud op. cit. (1976) pp.282-285.
40. The scores have been adjusted so that the total 'marks' awarded by each respondent are the same. Thus where a subject (e.g. H1) had marked two headings '1', these scores were adjusted to the average of the scores available:  $(1+2)/2=1\frac{1}{2}$ . In those few instances where another factor for enjoyment had been included (under 'other') in the rank order, that factor was simply omitted and the remaining factors moved up by one point. cf. Appendix 1 for details of questionnaire responses. In the case of one respondent (L12) the scores have been 'inverted': it appeared clear from the way in which the answers had been entered that this respondent had given the highest score for her preferred factor, scoring zero for 'visual violence/aggression'.
41. Wilson, op. cit. pg.153. cf. also pg.170 above.
42. ibid. pg.99. cf. also pg.195 above.
43. One respondent, H13, did pose the question (in answering questionnaire item 36) of why the sexual and excremental had been put together in one factor.
44. cf. Nowlis op. cit. (1966) and V. Nowlis and R. Green op. cit.; also pp.182-185 above.
45. Nowlis and Green op. cit. (1957) pg.360.
46. The distinction between the 'social audience' and the individuated spectator is an important one which has often been elided in recent (theoretical) work. Writing more specifically of TV soap opera and film melodrama, Annette Kuhn points out that "... the assumption is usually that such popularity has to do mainly with the social audience ... But when the nature of the appeal is sought in the texts themselves or in relations between spectators and texts, the argument becomes rather more complex." ('Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory' in Screen vol.25 no.1 (1984) pg.26)

47. Some of the responses by this respondent furnish salutary evidence of the kinds of factors that can muddy the waters of this kind of research. Four apparently perplexing adjective shifts for H13 were 'forgiving' (+3), 'sorry' (+3), 'sarcastic' (-3) and 'annoyed' (-3). It transpired, after the recorded discussion had been completed, that this respondent, who is an ex-colleague of mine, had been 'hurt' because of the way in which he had been asked to participate in the research; I had, in the event, contacted him at relatively short notice after another respondent had been obliged to drop out: he felt, therefore, that I had used him as a 'reserve'. It is, of course, impossible to say to what extent other shifts recorded by this respondent may have been affected by this 'extrinsic' factor.

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Grotesque and Excremental Humour:  
Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

Volume III of 3 Volumes

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Submitted for the degree of Ph.D

University of Warwick

Department of Film Studies

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Volume III

Appendix 1 Questionnaire

2 Humour Appreciation Test

3 Mood Adjective Checklist

4 Transcript of taped discussions

Appendix 1 Comedy Questionnaire

This questionnaire was sent to all those who expressed interest in taking part in the audience research project.

## Comedy Questionnaire

Please complete this questionnaire as accurately as possible, but feel free to omit questions if you cannot/prefer not to answer them; feel free also to comment/amplify on your responses.

The questionnaires are numbered in order to facilitate cross-referencing; please accept that anonymity will be observed as far as possible.

Your participation in this study is much appreciated. When you have completed the questionnaire, please return it to

Jan Udris  
3, Westview Rise  
Hemel Hempstead  
Herts

1. Please indicate your gender:

female

male

2. Please indicate your age-group:

19 or under

20-29

30-39

40-49

50 and over

3. Please indicate your marital status:

single

married

previously married

4. Please indicate your sexual orientation:

heterosexual

homosexual

bisexual

prefer not to specify

5. Are you

British by Birth

British by naturalisation

of other nationality (please  
specify)

6. Please specify your ethnic origins (eg. black, asian, white....  
use whatever term(s) you prefer)
7. If you are British, would you describe yourself as  
English  
Scottish  
Welsh  
(Northern) Irish  
other (please specify)
8. Is English your 'first' language?  
yes  
no
9. If you speak other languages, please specify and indicate  
degree of familiarity:
10. Please indicate the level of formal education you have  
completed:  
primary  
secondary (secondary modern)  
" " (comprehensive)  
" " (grammar-school)  
" " (independent/public school)  
college of further/higher education  
polytechnic  
university - first degree level  
" " - other degrees  
other (please specify)
11. Please indicate the number of years' formal full-time study  
you have been engaged in since leaving school:  
no. of years:
12. Are you currently pursuing any formal course of (full or part  
time) study? If yes, please indicate its nature.  
yes  
no
13. Please indicate the nature of your parents' main occupation(s)

14. Please indicate your preferred leisure activities, including any 'hobbies':

15. Are you currently in employment?

full-time

part-time

no

other (please comment)

16. Please indicate the nature of your work. If currently not employed, please indicate nature of previous work and/or area in which you would be seeking employment.

17. How much time would you estimate that you spend reading in an average week - for pleasure and for personal fulfilment?

under 2 hours

2-5 hrs

6-10 hrs

11-15 hrs

16-20 hrs

21-25 hrs

over 25 hours

18. Do you have (or have daily access to) a television?

19. Do you have (or have daily access to) a video recorder?

20. How much TV would you estimate that you watch each day (on average):

virtually none

under 1 hour

1-2 hrs

2-3 hrs

3-4 hrs

4-6 hrs

6-8 hrs

over 8 hours



21. How much TV would you estimate that you watch in one week  
(on average):
- virtually none
  - under 5 hours
  - 5-10 hrs
  - 11-20 hrs
  - 21-30 hrs
  - 31-50 hrs
  - over 50 hours
22. Do you more often give TV your undivided attention (even if  
you are with someone else), or do you tend to use TV-watching  
as a social activity?
- 'solitary'/concentrating approach
  - social use
  - comments
23. How often do you normally go to the cinema (including film  
societies):
- rarely
  - about once a week
  - about twice a week
  - about three times a week
  - four or five times a week
  - more often (please specify)
24. For every 10 films you see, please estimate how many you would  
be likely to see in each of the following ways/places:
- on rented video
  - on TV as broadcast
  - video of TV-broadcast film
  - at National or Regional film theatre
  - at other film club/society
  - local arts centre
  - other/comments
25. How many films (films originally made for cinema distribution)  
would you estimate that you see each week, either on TV, at a  
cinema, or elsewhere:
- practically none
  - one or two
  - 3 or 4
  - 5 or 6
  - 7-10
  - 11-14
  - 15 or over

26. Please indicate how regular your film-viewing patterns are. Do you go to the cinema regularly? with the same friends? Do your working patterns make film-viewing difficult? Please comment.

27. How often do you see films for a second (or 3rd etc) time?

never

rarely

sometimes

often

28. Do you usually find that a film is more enjoyable/rewarding on repeated viewing than first time round?

yes

no

Please comment on your answer.

29. Please list your 'favourite three films of all time'(!) and indicate how many times you have seen each one:

1

2

3

30. Over a number of films you go to see at the cinema (the last ten, say), how important would the following factors be in your choice of film? Indicate on how many of the 10 (or 20?) occasions each factor would have played a part. (You can count more than one factor for each film)

principal actor(s)

director

cinema/location

favourable review/criticism

word-of-mouth recommendation

type of film/story/plot

expected emotional/psychological effect (eg. comedy, melodrama)

who you're going with

other (please comment)

31. Please specify which newspapers you read most regularly:

Which other newspaper(s) do you also look at (and how frequently)?

32. Please indicate any cartoonists (newspaper or otherwise) whose material you like/look at regularly:

33. Which of the following TV 'comedy' programmes have you watched with any regularity? Please indicate how often you watched each (whole series, often, occasionally). Leave out those you haven't seen.

The Young Ones

MASH

Alas Smith and Jones

The Two Ronnies

Girls on Top

Who Dares...

Soap

Bless This House

Not The Nine O'clock News

Naked Video

Benny Hill Show

Kenny Everett

Filthy Rich & Catflap

Duty Free

Perfect Strangers

34. How does the list you have filled in for Q33 correspond to your TV comedy preferences? please comment.

35. Would you describe yourself as a 'Monty Python' fan?

yes

no, definitely not

no strong opinion

36. If you have just ticked 'yes', please indicate which elements of Monty Python humour contribute most to your appreciation. (number in order of importance). If you dislike Monty Python humour, please indicate which of the elements you find most objectionable or least pleasurable.

irreverence  
sexual/excremental content  
the animation  
visual violence/aggression  
absurdity/nonsense  
performance/acting  
other (please specify/comment)

37. Did you see some of the 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' series when it was first shown on TV?

yes, most/all of them  
one or two episodes  
no

38. Please indicate which of the following films you have seen:

And Now for Something Completely  
Different  
Monty Python and the Holy Grail  
Jabberwocky  
Monty Python's Life of Brian  
Time Bandits  
The Missionary  
Meaning of Life  
Brazil

39. Would you say that you tell jokes

frequently  
occasionally  
rarely  
practically never

40. Please indicate how/where you found out about this research project.

41. Please comment briefly on what you think the purpose of this questionnaire (and the research project overall) may be.

42. If you feel you would be able to spare about 3 hours to view a (video) film and to take part in a taped discussion, please indicate the dates/times which would be convenient for you:

Weds. 20th May 2.00 pm

Thurs 21st May 7.00 pm

Sat. 23rd May 2.00 pm

Tues. 26th May 7.00 pm

Weds. 27th May 7.00 pm

Thurs 28th May 2.00 pm

Sat. 30th May 2.00 pm

Again, thank you for your help!

Jan Udris

Appendix 2 Humour Appreciation Test (HAT)

Administered to respondents who viewed Monty Python's Meaning of Life as part of the audience research project.

## Humour Ratings Sheet for 'The Meaning of Life'

You will be watching 'The Meaning of Life', and the film will be (briefly) interrupted at 5 points. Please indicate how funny you have found each section of the film, on the seven-point scale below. For example, if you found a particular section more than moderately funny but not in the extremely funny category, you would tick box number 5 or 6. There will be a 10-20 second break between each section for you to make your choice.

### Section 1 'Crimson Permanent Assurance'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all						extremely funny
			moder- ately funny			

### Section 2 'Miracle of Birth'/'Growth and Learning'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all						extremely funny
			moder- ately funny			

### Section 3 'Fighting Each Other'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all						extremely funny
			moder- ately funny			

### Section 4 'Middle of the Film'/'Middle Age'/'Live Organ Transplants'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all						extremely funny
			moder- ately funny			

### Section 5 'The Autumn Years'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all						extremely funny
			moder- ately funny			

Section 6 'The\_Meaning\_of\_Life'/'Death'/'The\_End\_of\_the\_Film'

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not funny at all			moder- ately funny			extremely funny



Appendix 3 Mood Adjective Check List (MACL)

Administered to respondents immediately before and  
after viewing Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

## MOOD ADJECTIVE CHECK-LIST

Each of the following words describes a feeling or a mood. Please use the list to describe your feelings at the moment that you read each word. If the word definitely describes how you feel at the moment you read it, circle ' ' to the right of the word. For example, if the word is 'thirsty' and you are definitely feeling thirsty at the moment, circle the ' ' as follows:

thirsty ☒ ☒ ? no (definitely feel thirsty now)

If the word only slightly applies to how you feel at the moment, circle the single ' ' as follows:

thirsty ☒ ☒ ? no (you feel slightly thirsty now)

If the word is not clear to you or you cannot decide if it applies to your feelings at the moment, circle the question-mark:

thirsty ☒ ☒ (?) no (you can't decide whether you feel thirsty or not)

If you decide the word definitely does not apply to how you feel at the moment, circle the 'no':

thirsty ☒ ☒ ? (no) (definitely not thirsty now)

WORK RAPIDLY. YOUR FIRST REACTION IS BEST. WORK DOWN THE FIRST COLUMN, THEN THE SECOND. PLEASE MARK ALL WORDS. THIS SHOULD TAKE ONLY A FEW MINUTES.

PLEASE BEGIN.

accommodating	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	contemplative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
active	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	detached	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
afraid	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	delighted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
alert	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	depressed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
angry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	desperate	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
annoyed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	disinterested	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
apprehensive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	dissatisfied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
attentive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	doubtful	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
belligerent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	downhearted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
bored	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	drowsy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
calm	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	dull	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
carefree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	earnest	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
careful	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	efficient	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
cheerful	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	egotistic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
clear-thinking	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	elated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
concentrating	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	enthusiastic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no
confident	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no	fearful	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	?	no

fed up	✓✓	✓	?	no	refreshed	✓✓	✓	?	no
forgiving	✓✓	✓	?	no	regretful	✓✓	✓	?	no
frightened	✓✓	✓	?	no	sad	✓✓	✓	?	no
frustrated	✓✓	✓	?	no	sarcastic	✓✓	✓	?	no
full of pity	✓✓	✓	?	no	satisfied	✓✓	✓	?	no
helpless	✓✓	✓	?	no	sceptical	✓✓	✓	?	no
hungry	✓✓	✓	?	no	secure	✓✓	✓	?	no
inactive	✓✓	✓	?	no	self-centred	✓✓	✓	?	no
in pain	✓✓	✓	?	no	self-conscious	✓✓	✓	?	no
insecure	✓✓	✓	?	no	serious	✓✓	✓	?	no
inspired	✓✓	✓	?	no	shaky	✓✓	✓	?	no
interested	✓✓	✓	?	no	shocked	✓✓	✓	?	no
intoxicated	✓✓	✓	?	no	slow	✓✓	✓	?	no
introspective	✓✓	✓	?	no	smug	✓✓	✓	?	no
irritated	✓✓	✓	?	no	sociable	✓✓	✓	?	no
jittery	✓✓	✓	?	no	sorry	✓✓	✓	?	no
kind	✓✓	✓	?	no	startled	✓✓	✓	?	no
leisurely	✓✓	✓	?	no	strong	✓✓	✓	?	no
lustful	✓✓	✓	?	no	stubborn	✓✓	✓	?	no
meticulous	✓✓	✓	?	no	subdued	✓✓	✓	?	no
miserable	✓✓	✓	?	no	suspicious	✓✓	✓	?	no
nervous	✓✓	✓	?	no	talkative	✓✓	✓	?	no
obedient	✓✓	✓	?	no	tense	✓✓	✓	?	no
on edge	✓✓	✓	?	no	terrified	✓✓	✓	?	no
optimistic	✓✓	✓	?	no	thirsty	✓✓	✓	?	no
overjoyed	✓✓	✓	?	no	tired	✓✓	✓	?	no
panicky	✓✓	✓	?	no	trustful	✓✓	✓	?	no
persuasive	✓✓	✓	?	no	uncertain	✓✓	✓	?	no
playful	✓✓	✓	?	no	upset	✓✓	✓	?	no
pleased	✓✓	✓	?	no	vigorous	✓✓	✓	?	no
proud	✓✓	✓	?	no	warm-hearted	✓✓	✓	?	no
quiet	✓✓	✓	?	no	wide-awake	✓✓	✓	?	no
rebellious	✓✓	✓	?	no	worried	✓✓	✓	?	no

Appendix 4 Transcript of taped interviews/discussions which followed screenings of Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

## APPENDIX 4

### DISCUSSION TAPE TRANSCRIPTS\*

#### TAPE 1: H1

- Q: The plan would normally be to...then have a discussion with whoever's watching the tape...they're not rigid questions, although I've got a few ideas, written down...
- H1: Well, whenever we find time, if you want to know anything... but I can give you my...well, you can see that...
- Q: Well yes, I've got that, but there are a number of questions, I don't remember them all, about specific things...vague questions like why do you find various parts of it funny, some parts funnier than others...but then also, how one relates to things like little bits of sexism, or whatever, whether those things are actually a problem, or whether they...
- (Interruption: 'luckily I never had to work for Jews')
- Q: Yes, right...or racism, yes...what's that sort of thing doing in the film, is it disturbing, or is it actually funny, or...
- (Interruption: 'One should not forget about that this is also part of the meaning of life as well, you never come across to achieve something, not at the various places of knowledge which is mainly museums, but one thing you have achieved, and that is that is the knowledge that you never ever should work for Jews...ha ha ha ha...oh, sorry, you know...')
- Q: And also the same thing is done in a way to the naked women...
- H1: I felt a bit...I didn't feel really...they could have chosen another ...but because it said, this victim could choose his own way of dying, and so he could have chosen anything else, but he chose this sexist way...
- Q: Yes, but did you notice what he was convicted of...
- H1: I've forgotten, something with sex, no he was convicted of... he said he abused...no, he used sexist words in public against the church...
- Q: Making gratuitous sexist jokes on television...in a film... which is precisely what they're doing, in a way...
- H1: Yes, but you see...itis, of course you could have had another idea of...this is paralleling, then...sort of being on two levels, but you could have thought about doing it just the opposite, you see...for example, him being naked, and nuns fully dressed running after him...but it's just, why did they...its just...reinforcing the joke, or making the joke

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\* This transcript has been prepared with a view to providing an accurate account of what was said by each respondent. No systematic attempt has been made to record non-verbal utterances, though some particularly clear instances of laughter etc. are included. Pauses have been indicated by repeated stops: (...). Also, where respondents (or interviewer!) have jumbled/repeated words in searching for an appropriate formulation, the exact verbatim word sequence has generally not been reproduced.

visual, what he's accused of...

Q: Yes, I find myself sort of suspicious of... why bother to do that? If one is against sexism or something then why have something like that...what function does that sort of joke... if it is a joke, fulfil? so it always strikes me, my response as well is that there are sequences like that which I...feel uneasy with...

H1: Yes, and also I felt quite uneasy with...that vomiting bit, not with this, not in the beginning, but when he vomited onto the cleaning-woman, that bit, I felt was a bit too much...and this live transplantation, oh I really felt terrible with this

Q: ...but you were still laughing...

H1: Yes, because...oargh...well, because of his face, he was sort of...he was feeling terrible as well, this bloke...and because it went on and on and on, and in the end I couldn't, I just sort of, I just don't know whether I really laughed, all the way through...

Q: No, but you were laughing a fair bit...

H1: Oh, I hate, especially when he handled this organ and he cut the, it was like a navel-string between, I don't know he cut off another organ, probably, I don't know...because he needed only that liver and not the rest of it...but that was terrible, I felt...

Q: One question that I intend to... I haven't thought about phrasing it... is like if one doesn't find it funny, why one imagines other people would find it funny...I suppose you could turn that question round the other way...in what ways...

H1: This transplantation scene, for example, or the whole film...

Q: ...in general...or the exploding Mr Creosote...it's all to do with the education, the culture that one comes from, and age, all sorts... if I played that to my parents...they'd have a heart attack...they wouldn't find it in the least funny... virtually all of it...I'm wondering...why?

H1: For example what I really found funny was this...this sex lesson, of course it is close to my own reality, probably this is why I gave it the highest mark, because I felt, it's impossible, because how should anyone be bored, or should any of these pupils be bored and not pay attention when it's a lesson on sex, and especially if it's so openly discussed and in such, a very sort of casual, but very open and straightforward manner, and when that bed came down and...I could hardly believe that they really stripped, and the contrast, I felt very much, the contrast between this very rigid traditional school atmosphere with the tables and the boys, it probably was a boys' grammar school, nineteenth century set-up, and the very, in German you would say 'so schnodderig' that you don't have, it was sort of, he threw it into their faces, he didn't care whether there was anything perhaps troubling them, or...he could do it in any...

Q: I always get the feeling that when you talk about it in that way...the way you've just described it doesn't explain why you laugh so much...

H1: I feel that it's such a...I wouldn't have expected from what I know that you could say something like that on television or in a film...leave alone in a classroom...

Q: Therefore, what is it that's actually making it so funny, it's

got something to do with...taboos or shock, or...

H1: Yes, taboos, more or less, and the extreme...one the one hand it's the taboo, and then that...I really sometimes...perhaps it comes near the crudest fantasies one can have...

Q: What are you talking about in particular?

H1: That for example you have sex in the classroom in the widest sense...this is probably something I have in one way or the other, I have fantasies about, and I feel seeing it acted out in a very, well, in such a manner that all the...excitement...

Q: Why then does the fact that you see a fantasy acted out make it so funny...laugh so much?

H1: Well I think first of all I felt it was a kind of...embarrassment, that he said 'the vaginal juices' and how can you produce them...and I felt my God...are they going to talk about it...I was a bit embarrassed...

Q: ...but also as you say it's because it's so casual, as well...

H1: ...it's sort of as if he'd taught geography, or whatever...and it is the high level of feeling that it is a taboo, personal, and that it is handled in such a businesslike way, that helps me to laugh about it...if it was dealt with in a porn way, I probably would have got fidgety, or...

Q: ...or else, if he was in a medical class, ...dealing with it in a straight medical way...

H1: ...probably it would have been concentrated but not laughing...

Q: It was noticeable as well that you actually laughed before the film started...even before the credits came, before the title of the film, that's right, at the beginning of the Scarlet, Crimson Scarlet...Assurance, when the opening shot came on, which was (nothing funny)

H1: ...it was crimson!...it was something completely different! and it was done in that fashion of the forties, like an advert.

Q: so there was something funny...just that, yes...

H1: I felt, ah well they use another device, or...and I think that was followed up by this first sketch where they irritated this Hollywood...

Q: ...but I noticed that there was a laugh as soon as that first title, shot came up...

H1: Yes, probably it's also because I know that it is a Monty Python film, coming on, that I probably...

Q: You know, one of the things that's happening at the moment is that...this is the sort of thing that's likely to happen, I'm not sure if it should happen in interviews, is that I'm, for instance just now, I was aware of the fact that there was something I wanted you to say, and I was trying to guide you towards saying it...you were aware that it was a Monty Python film, and therefore you were in the mood, and therefore you'd laugh at almost anything...trying to prime you to say that...and so if I'm doing that with groups of people...actually encouraging them, pointing them in certain directions to say certain things...you can point to the interview... and say yes, they said this look!...it's proof!...(laughter)...

H1: But still... I think it's true...but also because I felt... I could have perhaps just lifted my eyebrows, or... but probably because I knew it was coming...

Q: That was another thing that I was thinking about doing was ...too complicated to film/video people when they were watching, if I had the money, the resources, that would be excellent...

H1: Can't you borrow...

Q: Well yes but... you can't get close enough, I mean I'd have to choose one person...people can move around a bit, go from one side of a chair to another...yes, if you want to have, say, all five people in shot, it's going to be quite a long way away, I don't know,...lenses and things, maybe you can sort of...but then you don't have the resolution, you can't really see the expressions on peoples' faces...

H1: You can, it's like with this lens...

Q: You can either use the telephoto and the zoom lens, sorry a wide-angle lens, that's what I mean if you concentrate on one person, and then you have to operate the lens, I'd have to actually be there doing it...the ideal in a sense is to just set up a camera and leave it running...

H1: but then you can't get closer to the people...

Q: ...that's right...but that would be ideal, it would be great to make a record of the actual facial response...

H1: You would have to have to have two cameras, one taking all the time the group...and one hand-operated one...

Q: In which case you need other people to help you...that would be ideal to be able to look at peoples' facial expressions and then to be able to talk about it afterwards...but that's extremely complicated...as you say there are all sorts of levels of response which are not...to actually then compare the way people have marked the the sheets...

H1: At one time I said, I can't remember when I did that... (indicates prodding/slapping someoneelse watching)

Q: yes and that's another thing is how much people interact... how much there's a group feeling to viewing...or whether people are really just watching it individually...

H1: I must say that also what played an important role for me was that I especially enjoyed if I fully understood all... the verbal puns and jokes...probably this for a native speaker wouldn't be of so much importance or delight...but I felt that was, well I understood nearly everything...

Q: Yes, and there's one point, there's one...half-scene which I feel doesn't work quite so well because, it's the song near the beginning where the choir...in the church...

H1: ...yes, I can't understand that...

Q: that actually doesn't come out perhaps clearly enough... maybe it just doesn't work so well, because the words are clearly...funny...that's not quite so clear...

H1: There are loads of...such a lot of it in it...

Q: But that's what I'm interested in looking at and I'm wondering... it may be OK because from what you say...what you find funniest I think, it seems, from just your reactions, are the sexual, the irreverence, and the sexual references... what about, the violence...

H1: ...yes, especially with this war scene, I found that I was really sort of on the fence between...that's a bit too much... I felt...



Q: Well that wasn't...I mean I knew I raised the question of violence but I mean is that particular scene about violence? ...it's happening in war, so to speak...

H1: yes but, I didn't find it extremely funny, because well first of all I felt the setting, well the actual joke was, I felt that in the end one after the other was killed off, was sort of shot down and he was left alone...

Q: ...I find the important thing is ...the exaggeration, the fact that, there's all this stuff about clocks, and presents and everything...it's a kind of parody/exaggeration...

H1: I felt it was such a simple make-up in just overdoing it and well you knew he was the...there was shot the first one and then the second and then you knew how it would end, so that for me, it spoiled...I liked the thing with this big clock being set up and then it was, this one was hit...ding! going 'ding' and...I liked that

Q: You laughed a lot when the first clock turned up as well...

H1: I thought it was absolutely ridiculous...

Q: ...which is the absurd, isn't it, it's just so absurd, and even the second one has that absurdity...but then after that, it...I wonder, that's interesting because I mean in a way the situation is still could you say increasingly absurd as it goes on but actually one gets used to...

H1: yes, you know what's going to come, I felt...after this second clock and he produced this...(laughter) I thought well they're all going to have this...clocks or watches or whatever, and then he came out with that cake...and then he was shot in the meantime and I felt oh no, not really...no, he shouldn't be shot, I felt sorry, really, then...

Q: But where else would one say that there is...exaggerated violence...the transplant scene...

H1: Yeh (disgust)...and with this Zulu fight, where this boy... (laughter) well he's stabbed, well it's absolutely unnecessary...

Q: Well no, there's a gag there, though, isn't there...the gag is that he's stabbed, and the other bloke just takes the coat..

H1: Well, this...with the leg, with this...that was raw meat... well you got used to it, at first I was shocked, I thought 'oargh' really, but then you really got used to it and then I identified it as a sort of joint...

Q: Is there any difference between violence and kind of grotesque bodily things...like the raw meat of the leg or something like that...

H1: Yes, yes, there is, there is. I find for example that whenever a person is stabbed like in the first scene where he sort of gets this...not in the first scene but in this first episode, with the Assurance Company...taking over...I felt when he actually stabbed somebody...this is what I find not...I don't want to see that...but, that he sort of is...jumped out of the window, or that he falls out, this is something where I yes well I say oh my God...but I can laugh about it, it's because I can't see blood actually...

Q: That's why I'm...there is a difference, then,...the leg isn't a result of a violent act...

H1: You get used to it

- Q: But what about the first time you see it...how do you react to that...
- H1: I thought 'my God' but I wasn't really shocked, I said 'eurgh' yes, but a very...very fast reaction, it was gone in a second.
- Q: And then it became part of what was funny...
- H1: Yes. What was funny about it, this absolute irrational and grotesque...behaviour, the way they deal with...it's so absurd, reality, it can't be realistic, especially like the people say after all, what, and you didn't wake up? Exactly what I thought: how can one be so stupid...yes well...of course, it's the British, what is it called, officers league, or... What I find is again the exaggeration and the absurdity it's the...I think it works that normally you would have reacted in a kind of panic way, this person, but he was reading the book, you see, absolutely browned off...it's just the contrast of what is normal and this makes me laugh and on top of that it's not only the contrast, on top of that it is that... they take it as their real world and they exaggerate more and more, they have their own code within this contrast...it's perfectly all right in that way, in that world, because he explains...for example with this virus, he says ah, it's going to grow again, how long does it take to grow again...and then, within this...absurdity, it's correct to ask this, and then, the other person goes back into reality...it seems...the reaction he shows seems as if... you say, ah well, it's absurd, to ask a question like that, and for a moment you expect him to be real again, and explain to him that, well, it's gone!
- Q: Yes, it seems to me that there are two...I think, that seems very interesting...uses two things: one is understatement, which is...sitting up in bed reading a book while having your leg (?)...the other one is exaggeration, in a sense I see that as exaggeration, that it can be a mosquito...it's a mosquito has bitten it off, which is a gross exaggeration of what a mosquito can do...I find there's a combination of understatement and exaggeration...
- H1: Yes, yes,...true.
- Q: One of the things that...I've got in my list there that Monty Python are obviously...one of their sort of trade-marks, was absurdity, you know the nonsense...I suppose...what's the distinction between nonsense and absurdity, because a lot of things in this film are absurd, whereas the...
- H1: ...there are some nonsense...
- Q: ...the television series often would be more characterised by the nonsense-absurd...
- H1: There was one sequence where I felt it was pure nonsense, was when there was, there were three people, no two, the one with the...ballet dance, the...
- Q: ...they were looking for the fish.
- H1: I didn't get, I didn't understand, I thought that was pure nonsense, the elephant, the person with these long arms and the other one, and I felt that was pure nonsense. I couldn't make anything of it, I didn't understand it.
- Q: And, you didn't find it...funny
- H1: No, no. I think I can only...I noticed that, that for example for me, what is ext...what really makes me laugh is, there are

little things, like when someone is...hit with a ruler

Q: ...in a particular way...yes...

H1: yes, like that. Like little boys do it, yes. It borders on slapstick.

Q: If it was slapstick in the sense that it was little boys doing it, in a different, in a school context, it wouldn't be nearly so funny...it's because it's...those 'old men' doing it in a sort of mock battle situation...

H1: yes, yes...and, what also makes me laugh, though I must really say...it's a different laugh, for example (laughter) is this game of rugby, where the teachers and the little boys played against each other, and they were really sort of, oh it was so brutal...

Q: Yes, but it made you laugh...

H1: Yes, it really did...

Q: Why did that make you laugh but you don't laugh at...violent things...

H1: I feel there is no harm, they will get up again, these boys, and...it's...it reminded me more of a mud-battle or whatever...it wasn't really...killing somebody...they might have terrible bruises and injuries...but these, for example that he...what is it, to pull a leg, no...the little boy was running with the...

Q: ...tackling...no. he tripped him up...

H1: he's (laughter)...this unfair game, this openly unfair game, what normally is hidden, yes, that is again totally against the rules, but it is taken seriously from all the rest of the party, again, and...I think it is also...one of them is obviously the one who is suffering, or there are no equal parties...where the boys...

Q: ...obviously, yes, so it's set up as...where there's one who clearly is...suffering...

H1: It is not, I feel it's different, I'm reminded of another joke, of another scene, of another Monty Python film, you remember this obstacle race...

Q: ...the 'Upper Class Twit'...

H1: (laughter)...this is something I really liked, though it was so...I think discriminating against handicapped people, and this is also something...I didn't really find anything discriminating...against...well, not this 'Jews' sentence...nor women...OK this scene, but it was not overtly discriminating against...

Q: ...no at least it was trying to make a joke...one can argue about whether the joke works or not, but it was actually trying to be clever about it, it was actually trying to be clever about making a joke about sexism...whether it works or not is another matter...

H1: and of course you could say that for example this 'All sperms are sacred'...you could call it discriminating...

Q: Yes you could...I suppose some Roman Catholics actually might not like it too much...

H1: ...yes, true...for me it's...

Q: There's an example of...I was writing about this last night...atabout this time...I was in the loft, I was in the middle of

writing something about satire...and there's a definition of... this guy called Max Eastman, who gives different definitions of satire, and he says that the broadest type of satire is one which attacks large groups of people...in a very blunt way... and people who take offence at that really don't have much of a sense of humour...and his example is the invention of a 'Smith-rolling machine'...a machine that rolls 'Smiths', people called Smith, so if someone called Smith gets upset about that thay (don't) have much of a sense of humour, because there are so many Smiths...

H1: But I think there are limits to...

Q: 'There are limits, aren't there!'

H1: ...no, where I feel I can't laugh about it any more...it's this vomiting scene onto the cleaning-woman, this is where I feel no, that's going too far...I don't mind the waiter stepping into the bucket...

Q: ...or indeed simply the vomiting...vomit all over the place, I mean again it's like the...something else...I mean you were sort of saying 'eurgh' 'awful' but you were laughing as well...

H1: Yes...I felt like the other people, like this bloke who... threw up as well (laughter) and I felt, oh yes, and...I felt very sympathetic with that woman talking about her period... I felt yes it's just this crazy talk that must come out in this awful situation...she seemed to be completely out of her mind...

Q: You're doing something else there, aren't you, in a sense aren't you identifying...it's not the sort of thing that normally happens in this sort of film...whereas in that situation...

END OF RECORDING.

#### TAPE 1: H5, H7

Q: I've got a few specific sort of points I'd like to raise... but if we start off talking generally about Monty Python, Meaning of Life, then if they don't come up at first then I'll bring them in later...you said that you've seen it twice before and you've seen it at least...

H5: at least once...I've only seen it once...

Q: ...so what do you think of it now and what did you think of it when you first saw it?

H5: I think it's...not as funny as some of the other ones, like my personal favourite's Life of Brian...but it's got some really funny bits in it that just sort of crack me up...

Q: Why in particular?

H5: ...sift through...bits...the Mr Creosote bit, just because of certain things, like the way John Cleese says 'wafer thin', I don't know why, it just makes me really laugh...just certain catch-phrases and just seeing the Monty Python, when they dress up as women, they always use the certain voice that you just associate, that it's going to be Terry Jones, or one of them sitting there dressed up as a woman...

Q: you reckon...that's the main thing...just sticking with the Mr Creosote sequence, I mean is there anything else about it...

...that makes you laugh...

H5: Like a key thing that...Just the fact that he's so obnoxious, and the swearing's actually funny...because they're so obviously polite to him, and he's being so revolting back... that sort of sticks in my mind as...you know, from before, 'cos as the film was going through I was starting to remember just vague bits...I didn't remember it as much as I thought I would and then and then suddenly when the restaurant scene came on I remembered oh, it's going to be Mr Creosote, and the name as well is so stupid...

Q: Are there any bits that you particularly found funny the first time that you felt didn't work this time?

H5 No I don't think so I think all the funny bits were those ones that I recognized again this time and made me laugh again, like the fish with the faces, that's another thing I remember from the other time, 'Morning, morning' it's like a ... especially having worked in an office it really made me laugh even more, because I used to sit and think that when I used to work in an office...bored out of my skull I used to look at everyone saying 'good morning' I used to imagine them with fish bodies...so I don't think any bits didn't work again ...if anything they worked more, you know, because...

Q: Which were your sort of favourite...

H7: The Mr Creosote bit...I really liked that...when that come on I did remember a lot of it...as with other bits, but more so with that particular thing, I was actually laughing before things...sort of come up...also the Northern scene, the life... Catholic family...that was pretty good...

H5: The bit I like as well is that, the death one, the final bit, where he says 'the salmon mousse!' (laughter)...makes me laugh...because you don't expect it, the grim reaper, and they're treating him as if he were just a guest...it's the politeness thing, you know, taking the mickey out of everyone being so polite, which I think is...

Q: One of the things I try to get pinned down sometimes is sort of particular...for some people it seems to be particular things that they find, that they go for, whereas...you seem to pinpoint quite a few different things, I mean you've already said, something surprising or absurd, the unexpected... and you mentioned performance, enjoying John Cleese performing in...the waiter and everything and then there's Mr Creosote being so obnoxious, so horrible, so there are several things already,,,but you don't feel there's one is more important than the others or...

H5: No, I don't think so because they all make you laugh in a different way...

H7: In certain sketches I think certain ideas come over more than others, like in the grim reaper sketch what appealed to me was the fact that the people were so patronising and nice and that I thought was really funny whereas, something like, to me in the Northern sketch that was so sort of silly and absurd and they're equally as funny in their own different way...you didn't get, I feel you don't get a mixture of both...in the other things...

Q: I noticed you laughing, that's something you haven't mentioned this time, that there were quite a lot of points at which you were laughing at 'the dirty bits' so to speak, I mean the

'Penis song' (laughter)...you responded quite 'well' to that; what do you think is funny about that?

H7: I think it's the way that it's done, I mean if...because it's done in that 'Noel Coward' manner, sort of helps it along... I mean if Benny Hill come along and just sort of sung it, the way someone like Benny Hill would do it...to me, it would just be for it's own sort of sake, it would sort of fall flat, but the way they do it, it's...the way they go about and present ...a joke or whatever, it's not just sort of flung right at you, it's well...it's got a good foundation, it's well sort of built up...

H5: It's like on that particular bit where the Noel Coward song... the expressions on their face, there's something about the faces, like...Eric Idle's sort of...Noel Coward face just tickled me anyway, plus the fact that it was a really funny song...about a penis...the ...

H7: ...and the whole surroundings as well, it's totally...

H5: ...and the people, the way they're looking and 'Oh, how marvellous', you know, afterwards...just like they would... in the normal Noel Coward...Noel Coward type film, you know... the expressions as well I think...

Q: What about, there are various other points like in the 'Every sperm is sacred' sketch, where...' mean how do you think... there are comments in there like the boy saying 'Couldn't you have had your balls cut off'...how do you think those sorts of...just using words about sex and dirt...and also in the school sequence, John Cleese the teacher talking about vaginal juices and everything...how do you think those things work?

H5: In the Catholic scene, that bit about when the little boy says 'why don't you have your balls cut off?', I didn't actually think that was very funny, compared to other things, (H7 agrees) and yet in the other sketch, the one about the vaginal juices, that made me laugh, but I think that's because it was John Cleese saying it, do you know what I mean, it wasn't necessarily what he was saying, it's just the way he... sort of, Basil Fawlty type, 'vaginal juices', you know, it just made me laugh, whereas the little boy saying it, I sort of...it didn't actually make me laugh...

H7: With the school scene it was sort of...like the whole way it was done...it's just not that sort of thing, to sort of say those sort of things in that sort of public school sort of surrounding...and the whole sort of atmosphere, the whole sort of context of all that was ~~so~~ sort of ~~up the wall~~...that's what I found funny about it... <sup>uproar</sup>

Q: So...very very crudely, as you probably saw, the way I split it up into sections, I mean there was one section then which was about sex, more or less,...and the next section was more to do with fighting and violence...do you remember which you responded more to?

H7: Doesn't immediately spring to mind that I responded to one more than the other...

Q: I'll look it up afterwards...(laughter)

H5: I don't think I...I think I found the sex one funnier, I think the fighting one I...that was the one with the tiger and everything, wasn't it, biting the leg, I don't think I found that...I felt that went on a little bit, as if it was it wasn't brilliantly funny, it sort of went on a bit, but it

was still very funny, but it wasn't...

Q: Yes, yes...do you feel it's got something to do with the structure of the sketches themselves rather than the fact that it's...one's about sex and the other one's about...chopping bodies up and...well, somebody losing their leg and...

H7: I think sometimes it's the structure of the sketches 'cos I've found that before with some other Monty Python things that sometimes things can seem to be a bit laboured, a bit... try to drag everything out a bit, sometimes...

Q: Actually I agree with you that tonight for the first time I found myself watching the Zulu war sketch, and realizing that when the doctor's, when Graham Chapman's seeing and looking at the leg, I was watching John Cleese and Michael Palin, and they were standing there doing absolutely nothing; I mean that's unusual, in a sense in a lot of other sketches would be a lot faster, as you say, but there, it's just sort of, you know, one person talking and others just standing there doing ~~doing~~ nothing, which is really what you're saying...

To go back to something I said right at the beginning about the questionnaires, or rather filling in the sheets about how funny do you find this, did you have any problems with that?...deciding...

H5: ...that was the initial one you sent to us...

Q: no, no, this is the one you filled in during the film. How funny do you find the various parts of the film...did you have any problems with that...

H7: No, not really, no...

Q: ...because...several people who did the questio...who did that said that it's very difficult to decide, like for instance the first section, the Crimson Permanent Assurance, people said well I liked it, I enjoyed it but I didn't find it funny.

H7: Yes, there are some sort of clever things in that, but not sort of things that would actually make you sort of laugh out loud; all the way through, I suppose I was sort of smiling to myself, and every time I've seen that, I've found that better every time, because when I first saw it, I remember thinking, 'this is a bit...naff' but every time I've seen it, it's got better; but there's nothing in there that would actually you know really make me laugh, but I enjoyed that, it was good... clever things in there...funny-clever...it was good...

Q: Did either of you notice any other moments in the film when there's something else other than just finding something funny?

H7: The animation at the very beginning I though was good, yes, there's some good bits in there...that was clever, that was well, some good symbolic things, it was well structured...

H5: Something I found odd was the, you know the Zulu bit, we were saying about and Eric Idle, they go past all the injured ones and Eric Idle sort of says, 'I...this great here, I kill fifteen, I get a medal, if I was back home they'd fucking hang us'...he says something like that, and that I found odd because that's...they often say, you know, they're always getting at people, various institutions and whatever, but I can't remember sort of seeing something where you...they do it as blatant as that, do you know what I mean that was more like a real sort of statement against you know...

H7: ...that wasn't quite as subtle as other things...is it...

H5: No, that's right, normally it's quite comic, but that was like quite sort of you know, direct and I thought, blimey, that's not really like Monty Python...that's something that sticks in my mind as being...

H7: ...but it was still funny though!

H5: ...oh yes it was still very funny, but in a different sort of way, 'cos it made you, you know it wasn't...they didn't then take the piss out of it again, it was just sort of that was it, you know...

Q: Yes I mean that's to do as well with the question of surprise or shock...there...why is it funny, I mean as you say it's still funny though...then what is it that's funny about that particular ...Eric Idle saying that...I mean I agree that one laughs, I tend to laugh at that, but then... I think it's the surprise or the shock of such an explicit statement in that context.

H7: Yes, yes, probably...

H5: Could be, because you suddenly...you want to laugh all of a sudden, because it has...probably shocked you a bit and you... laugh anyway as a release...

H7: It's absolutely true, but it seems strange to see it, but it's so true...

Q: Yes the other thing I was thinking about, deciding about whether something's funny or not, I mean that could be a problem, as you said, because...one has other pleasures... what other sorts of pleasures do you think you got from Meaning of life that you wouldn't necessarily say it's funny...

H5: The cleverness of the songs, I mean even though they're comic songs, you can appreciate that they're really clever, the way their words were put together and that, and that made you laugh in a sort of a different sort of a way, 'cos you suddenly thought, that was really clever, like the 'Sperm song' and that, it made you laugh because you thought how clever the words were as well...

Q: And then there's something you mentioned before as well, was the performance

H5: Mm yes, the way it was done...

H7: The actual sets and everything, it's not sort of cardboard quick flash-in-the-pan sort of sketches, they're well structured, or well rehearsed...

H7: Like the Yorkshire bit where all the blokes opening the doors of the toilets, you know, it's just like a musical like Oliver or something like that, but it's...

H7: There's a lot of work gone into it, it's not just...

Q: Which of the individuals do you each actually prefer?

H5: In the Monty Python team? I like them all, I think...the one that does, Terry Gilliam, who does the animation, I think his animation's brilliant, but I don't particularly find him that funny, 'cos I know he doesn't appear in everything, but he he's often there and I find...that he doesn't make me laugh really...but the rest of them I...I don't know, I, their faces are so familiar to me now...

Q: But you wouldn't, you don't have a favourite...

H5: No, not really, no, not a favourite...



Q: What about you...

H7: No, I don't have a favourite...no but I think certain people shine in certain sketches...can't think of any examples but...

Q: Well...what sketches do you associate them with, I mean...what types of sketches?

H7: John Cleese always seems to be a...a middle class sort of upright sort of chap...there always one chap who's always playing women, as well...Terry Jones...

H5: ...Terry Jones and Eric Idle are always sort of...and occasionally Michael Palin...

H7: I always think of Terry Jones as the...as a woman...

H5: as the woman with the curlers and the sort of Mrs Smoker-type 'oooh', that one...

H7: Chapman is the...

H5: ...the stupid sort of major, or...

H7: yes, the sort of boffin...(imitation?)...comes across as that sort of chap...I dunno...can't think of any other I've come across in any particular character...

Q: Well again I think you've pinpointed the main differences... yes I mean Graham Chapman was trained as a doctor, and so he is as you say in that kind of authority figure...the colonel and everything else...

You've just mentioned Terry Jones...well, then being in drag...on various occasions; one thing that several people have raised about this film is...the possibility of...well representations (in inverted commas) of women. How do you feel about it or do you not have any...I mean, what are the representations of women there; you've got various characters in drag, well Terry Jones mostly, you've got the women at the end, when the bloke is being sentenced for gratuitous sexist jokes in a moving picture...do you respond to that in any particular way, or...how do you feel about it...

H7: No strong feelings about it, really...

H5: I mean that...the fact that they...well if they hadn't said that bit about what he's been sentenced for; if he'd been sentenced for robbing a bank or something, then perhaps I would have thought, oh, you know, Benny Hill again, sort of sexist stuff, but because they put that in, he's been sentenced for gratuitous...that sort of made it, you know I didn't mind that there were loads of naked women running across...'cos then it was taking the mickey out of...sexist things...

H7: ...made it acceptable, it was part of ...the joke of...

Q: But is it really, I mean... you can take it further...

H5: ...yes you can take it further I suppose...

Q: You could then go on to say...

H5: It's a bit tricky, that, really, you don't really...I mean all through the Monty Python you always had like, the old ones with Carol Cleveland, she's always like the busty sort of secretary, but there she's so over the top, it's almost taking the mickey of people who...do the sexist things, you know what I mean, it's sort of borderline...

H7: I don't like things that are just thrown at you at face value ...sort of humour that's just...things that are a bit more, have got a bit more depth in them...no matter what it's about, I think they'd be a bit more acceptable...

- Q: And you feel that that's...for instance, yes, the representations of women; if there is that element of parody or taking the mickey out of the usual sexist stereotype, then that makes it acceptable...
- H7: ...yes, or funny...
- H5: I find... 'cos it's one of their...allright you could say that Terry Jones is sort of, you know, debasing women, you know there's always the fag, and the curlers and all that, but there again when you had that Protestant scene, you had ... like, Graham Chapman, you know, sort of saying 'I can go down and buy a wotsit' and she's going 'Why don't you, why don't you?' and it makes him out to be a real twit, so he's like a yes, it's then taking the mickey out of a bloke that could be like that...so I think the balance sort of makes you...you don't get angry, because you think well, it's balanced, somehow...and you get the stupid army people, you know, they make the blokes in the army as twits, so it sort of balances it up, it's not all against women...really they poke fun at everyone and anyone that...you know, they can think of, so...
- Q: Yes, and I think people suggested that the very fact that it's somebody in drag, and not a woman, playing that role, does make it quite different.(general agreement)...that you can't talk about it in the same way...the fact that it's Terry Jones in drag, being a cleaning woman, really isn't the same as if it actually was a woman playing that.
- Are there any other things that...apart from the possible thing about sexism, which I raised (laughter)...are there any other things, though, that...the point I'm trying to get at is whether sometimes we laugh at things despite ourselves... I mean, stepping outside Monty Python for a moment, maybe sort of racist jokes, things like that...I mean I think I have to admit that there are times when I don't want to hear a racist joke but somebody insists, and you smile, I'll smile, because there's something clever about it, I mean, how do you feel about that? Do you find yourselves, do you recognize that? situation...
- H7: Oh yes...
- H5: What, within Monty Python...
- Q: well or else...or outside it...
- H5: Yes...yes I suppose you do it, but it's also sort of a social thing isn't it, I mean...you sort of think afterwards...oh I didn't really want to laugh at that...particularly, it wasn't really funny, like another Paki joke if you want, you know, people are always making jokes about Pakis, but...it's too, I suppose it's laziness, it's too much effort to sort of say in a group of people, oh, I object to that joke, so you sort of smile...it's an easy way out, isn't it, sort of thing... and at the time, I suppose perhaps you don't really think about it, it's just 'a joke'...you don't think till afterwards, you know, I don't really like...calling someone a Paki, but... I don't know it's hard, isn't it, it's hard to sort of... describe why you do (?)...it's a mixture of things, isn't it...sort of an easy way out...something where you'd rather not go against the grain, sort of thing.
- Q: But it can also be I think something to do with...how good a joke it is.
- H7: Yes, yes...I agree with that...
- H5: Yes, that's true, I mean you can...bad taste things you can...

... 'cos really the jokes that are around at the minute about the ferry disaster, I mean, that's such a terrible thing, and if when you think about it in the cold light of day, you think oh God, I should never laugh at a joke about the ferry disaster... because it was such a terrible thing, you know... but then when someone does a joke, and it is a pretty clever one, like the one my dad told me the other night, I really did laugh, but then a couple of hours later I thought well, that was really nasty of me to laugh and I felt guilty for laughing, but at the same time it was a good play on what happened, you know... and it was funny when he said it to me. But maybe I shouldn't really... in my heart of hearts I wouldn't really have laughed...

H7: I feel the same but I don't think I would have sort of thought about it a couple of hours later... and feel guilty about it; I would have laughed... I wouldn't have such strong guilt feelings it...

H5: I must admit, just purely knowing ... you know, how awful it was, and the fact that I'd laughed... I just thought well, it wasn't really a nice thing to do, laugh at such a disaster... it was something really...

H7: ... because when things... things like that happen I almost sort of wait for a joke to sort of occur about a disaster like that ... you know a topical sort of thing.

Q: Yes, another question that might be worth asking is is it necessarily a negative thing... I don't know... what I think of it myself, but I mean is it necessarily always a bad thing to joke about things like that?

H7: It depends, the situation and who you're with at the time...

Q: I suppose so, yes, I mean what the criteria are for whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but you know in a sense it might be in some situations that to make a joke of something that is awful can be actually be like a sort of survival strategy... a way of coping with it...

H7: Yes, yes, ... very true

H5: Mm, yes, yes, that's true. Yes, that's true, it's quite a... Yes, 'cos you can't be sort of... it's like at work...

H7: Yes, I was just going to say that...

H5: you know working as we do, at a training centre, if you sat and thought about all those people in there and their disabilities and handicaps and that, and... didn't find any of them funny, you'd probably be a nervous wreck yourself, wouldn't you, really, you'd be so overwhelmed by thinking, Christ, you know it's really sad about them all, or it's really unfortunate etcetera etcetera... if you couldn't find things funny and laugh, you know, laugh things off... and make jokes, you know after hours or whatever, you know...

Q: ... in the staffroom or wherever...

H5: that relief isn't there, you need that relief...

H7: It's using humour as a kind of a barrier, in a way, isn't it?

H5: I suppose it is, or a release, sort of...

H7: ... to bounce off all your sort of distress or whatever

H5: Yes, I suppose it is, only you don't really think about it as that way, but it is an automatic relief, isn't it... for

things you can't sort of get out of you any other way

H7: But I also find I've got, I sort of look for things that are funny, as well at times...

H5: Yes, I do, I do

H7: ...perhaps unfortunate situations, but...maybe it is for that reason though, as well, so I don't sort of hurt myself.

Q: Yes. I think that at an ordinary school like ours it's probably not as...I mean there are situations which are not as difficult...in many ways; but the same thing is happening I think, that you know in most staff-rooms you get quite a few of the teachers making jokes about kids...and I know the feeling that I mean I've often felt disturbed by that...I hear other people making nasty comments about kids in a joking way, and I don't like it really, and I can imagine that somebody coming in from outside, off the street, would be really shocked in a sense one of the reasons I don't like it is because I'm aware of that ...I think God if there was somebody here listening to this, this would be terrible, I don't like it... on the other hand yes I have to recognize that it's a kind of survival strategy...a way of coping with the situation which perhaps one needs, yes...

H7: At work...I'd only share that sort of humour with certain people, certain other members of staff, not all members of staff...feel your way round the staff, as it were, know who you...share that humour with...

Q: Yes, I think that's exactly right...Yes, there are people with whom I wouldn't like to share it because I feel that from them it actually is very...callous and I don't share their cynicism and callousness about

H5: And also you don't share it with certain people because you think they're...that's what they'll think of you, whereas you know you're not doing it, you don't actually mean it in a horrible way, you're doing it because you want to make someone laugh or you know it's going to be funny...you know if you say it to someone, they'll go away thinking...ugh, that's not a very nice thing to say, and yet you didn't ...you meant it just as a humour thing and you didn't really do it against that particular client or whatever...

Q: Is there anything like that...I mean, it's a different situation, but...get back to Meaning of Life; is there anything else apart from possible sexism, are there any other things floating around which you feel could be objectionable...not only to you, to people in general...

H7: I suppose there could be quite a few things, really...

H5: What any aspect, now, we're talking about... There's something that stuck in my mind in the Catholic scene with all the children, which didn't...doesn't upset me, but a friend of mine, I remember saying that she watched Meaning of Life and found it really funny but was really shocked by the fact that there was like lots of children in that part of the film and they were all talking about, you know, sperm...whatever else was in the song, and she found that really objectionable because she thought they shouldn't have used children for the film in that respect and got them to sing all that because that was, you know that was...against their innocence etcetera etcetera, which never really dawned on me, because I sort of found it funny, kids you know singing 'sperm' etcetera etcetera,

but when she said it I thought well...that could be very upsetting for a lot of people, especially parents, I mean I'm not a parent, so...you know, perhaps that's why I didn't particularly think of it as being in that way, but the way they said it...it suddenly struck...well yes, that is right, really that's pretty objectionable, a little kid, that high, saying, you know, 'why don't you have your balls cut off'... that's quite...

Q: On the other hand, yes...that's, it's objectionable possibly for the parents, but I mean there are plenty of kids around who would be saying...a lot worse than that anyway, so...

H5: Yes, that's true...that's true

Q: Who is...who is one actually offending and why...yes I mean nobody else has mentioned that point, it's something I've sort of sort ...

H5: It just stuck in my mind...I forget who it was...I think it's someone I used to work with, when they were talking about it, a good while ago, said that bit, you know, they enjoyed it all but they found that bit really objectionable because of that ..but that never really struck my mind until I saw it tonight, I suddenly remembered them saying it...

H7: I suppose the transplant scene can be seen as sort of sick... over the top...

H5: ...just purely because it is...all the blood spurting, and also like when they're dropping the babies, I mean I found that really funny but someone might think that's... because they do look really realistic...I mean let's face it...they're covered in blood and sort of and like the actual birth scene, it really does look, I knew they're wobbling (?) it about and ...you know...it's obviously a rubber baby or whatever but it does look very realistic...

H7: I suppose the Mr Cressete sketch as well could be...

H5: Yes, 'cos it's all...being sick and whatever...but I find the humour in that overrides the possible revolting bit it could be, to me, it's overridden by the humour...

Q: ...you've got to be, you've got to be careful about what you mean by humour...(laughter) because what you laugh at...

H7: Yes, it's an individual thing, really, isn't it...

Q: I mean that's...there are two different apparently opposite sort of sets of research that people found...seem to have found; one is that people laugh or find funny things which they kind of have a sort of an emotional investment in, an anxiety about...you know, if you're actually worried about illness you actually find it more funny...because it's a sort of release from the tension that one normally feels about it, and other people seem to have found the opposite, that if one has, like you said, and also if one has a relative who is ill or you know somebody in hospital having some sort of operation, then one isn't going to find the Liver Transplant thing funny...I mean there seem to be kind of opposed sets of results...

H5: I was thinking...saying about that...that's true because... with, like Derek and Clive, this is going away a bit from Monty Python and that, but you know Derek and Clive...when I was younger I used to sort of...(?)...I used to find everything funny and they do a hell of a lot of sketches about cancer, and they really are quite horrific about it,

do you know what I mean, but, I used to, you know I find that, really, well I found it hysterically funny, and then my nan died of cancer, and after that, I still found it funny, but it had a sere note, and I couldn't...and nowadays, if I listen to them I can't...I can still find it funny but it's not, it's got a dead note about it...(laughter)...that's a bad choice of words! but a sort of a...you know, because it's obviously got quite close to my heart, you know and it's sort of...whereas before I was like...you know I can remember just rolling about on the floor and it was so funny the way they were singing these songs about cancer and whatever and...because it struck home with me, with the death of my nan, and then it, after that I can't really look at it in the same light, it doesn't really...it's still funny, but it's not...and I feel a bit guilty thinking that I was you know laughing so much about it...

- Q: So in that situation it seems to be working against it, whereas for instance in the sort of situation you were talking about in a, you know school or institution where one is concerned with say handicapped people...there one is actually more likely to find perhaps jokes about handicap in some ways more acceptable because it's a...see what I mean...(agreement)...but I dare say it's not as simple as that...
- H5: It's probably like the times you laugh and there's really a deep-rooted reason probably, you can't even...someone has to probably work out with you what it is, I would think...like you were saying about Mr Creosote sketch, perhaps it is something deeper than just...(?)...
- Q: I think it's got a lot, I mean one of the things that every body laughs at one way or another in that sketch...I shouldn't say everybody, but everybody I've come across, laughs at one way or another in that sketch is when he's actually being sick...what kind of laughter is it?...that's the thing...
- H7: Probably the sort of laughter that it's so revolting, it's happening so much, that...everybody hates being sick themselves, that it's just...a kind of strange sort of relief, I suppose...and also the fact...nobody could ever be that sick...such amounts, it must be some sort of...
- H5: I think it's that shock thing as well, isn't it 'cos you say, you know, he just sort of...pukes up everywhere, and you're sort of, you're quite shocked and in a way...I don't know if you're embarrassed or not but it's a feeling of a sort of embarrassment 'cos you think oh, he's being sick, and you immediately laugh, like a sort of an embarrassed laugh almost, knew what I mean, sort of a...and then you do begin to find it funny, but the sort of first reaction you sort of think eh, I better laugh...
- H7: You shouldn't be doing that...funny, it's that sort of thing...
- H5: Yes, yes
- Q: But I feel the most effective and shocking part moment in that is when he suddenly sick all over the menu, I think that's a bit unexpected...comes out so quickly...
- H5: ...that's right, and he holds it up and it drips out the bottom...
- H7: yes, and it splatters everywhere...

- Q: ...folds...folds it with...(imitate splash)
- H7: It's incredibly realistic, I think everyone's...not sick over a menu, but they know what...it's sort of like! sort of rings true...
- H5: there's a lot of realistic things in there, like the sick really looks like sick and the babies really look like newborn babies, and the liver really looks like it's, you know ...the way they do it, so they do make it very very ...
- H7: ...which I suppose again goes back to the...overall enjoyment of the things that...props and scenes and everything are well done...it might be so funny if it didn't look like sick, if it looked like water, or the baby looked like a cardboard-cut-out or something...
- Q: ...there is a moment though when, the last time he's sick on John Cleese's leg, it seems to just go off his leg like water...(laughter)...noticed that...next time you see it, watch out for that!
- Yes I mean, Derek and Clive, I've actually jotted down as one of my things...in relation to 'pure smut'...dirtiness and the joke-form...said that perhaps the audience reaction to Derek and Clive could be gauged, I mean I've actually toyed with the idea of playing a Derek and Clive tape to people and saying...how do you respond to that, but I think that goes further, as you say, than Monty Python, anyway, but I mean...how far can you go with just being crude, which it degenerates into, and people still finding it funny...
- H5: When I, when I first heard of Derek and Clive and heard their records, the swearing and everything really I found, like I say about the cancer, hysterically funny, I mean I could spend just hours just killing myself laughing, just because there it was like one swearword after another, but now I mean sort of a couple of years later or whatever, unless it's just me that's changed but I, sort of...it's not as funny; I still find certain things funny, but it's almost as if to say...swearing isn't as funny any more...for some reason then it really really made me laugh my head off...but...I don't know, perhaps I was more carefree in those days...
- H7: I've never found that as funny...as Monty Python...yes, I've always found it a bit sort of gratuitous of swearing and all sorts of things...some of it was humorous but overall I don't think it's quite...as well structured, if you like, as Monty Python is...I think a lot of it's sort of...it's not scripted or anything anyway is it...it's very loosely, it seems to be very loosely sort of...
- H5: ...and yet that's something that made me...I found funnier because of the fact that it's just them sitting in the thing getting drunk...you know just...spouting out all these things, and some of the answers they gave used to really tickle me 'cos it was like really off the cuff sort of stuff...
- Q: ...let me see if there's anything else...umm...yes I mean what...you haven't been watching the original series, have you seen the original series at any time, or...
- H5: ummm, I just saw...I didn't see the very original ones because I was...I was very young then (laughter)...look at the telly ...(?) but...ones they repeated on Saturday night, I saw one a friend of mine had taped; I didn't find it as funny as their more recent things...by recent I don't mean just the films or whatever, but their more recent series...

- Q: ...the last series was '74...
- H5: 'cos they're the ones I remember...the more up-to-date series, not the...the (???) these sort of ones...
- Q: Yes but they only made four series, that was between '69 and '74...
- H5: well I think the ones I caught must have been right at the end of that, because those ones they're repeating on Saturdays I don't remember, and to me they look more dated than the ones I do remember, 'cos I, the ones I do remember was when I was in junior school, which must have been '74, 'cos '69 I was only, what four (laughter)...but yet when the last series was on I was then in junior school and that's when I first discovered, you know, what it was and that, so...I caught the end of the series...
- Q: Yes...have you seen...
- H7: I can actually remember the first one ever being on telly, I was nine then...I can remember being fascinated by them; some things were funny, obviously for a different reason then, it was totally different from any other sort child-like humour on TV at the time, and I think, I suppose over the years I must have seen quite a bit of the old series, 'cos they've been repeated so many times...I suppose I've heard more, on records, as well, 'cos when I was at, when I started secondary school I had a group of friends that used to sit and recite things parrot-fashion, which after a while took the edge off, the funny edge off...
- Q: yes...I was talking to somebody in fact last night...doing it in London with a group, who was also nine when the first series came out and said he used to stay up with his...fight to stay up with his...saying 'I want to stay up and watch this' and he said it was great because it was so different...
- H7: Yes, yes, I can remember just being amazed, it was you know... I wasn't rolling about on the floor...I was thinking erikay! really different...
- Q: ...but in general, what sort of people would you imagine would have been watching that, or what sort of people would you say it would appeal to...
- H7: At the time?
- Q: Yes; either at the time or...
- H7: Maybe a fairly wide group of people but for different reasons, different...because it's...it's not like certain comedy series that you know will be the same all the way through...I mean it will always be slightly different and slightly, I can't describe it, wacky, way out, or whatever, but things will be, they'll be varied every week, it won't be like a sitcom...it won't be like a Benny Hill, where you knew the jokes are going to be roughly the same every week, it won't be that sort of thing, so I suppose it could appeal to a wider variety of people at different times, different things, whether they're...all those people would sit down and watch it all at once, to get their one little bit out of it all at the same time, if you see what I mean, I don't think you can just say it'll be just these sort of people who'll like it...
- Q: In general, I mean it does seem to me that there are a lot of people who actually wouldn't want that unpredictability,



who actually prefer something predictable and something where they know what they're going to get.

H5: I should imagine...I always imagined that it appealed to people that were very open-minded, right from when I first sort of saw it...I, and if I, especially when I was younger, if I sort of met people that didn't...like it or when I played their record didn't find it funny, then that used to quite colour my judgement about them...do you know what I mean, I used to sort of think, I remember someone coming to our house when I was younger, and we were all sort of mucking about or whatever and finding out that this friend of my dad's or whatever didn't like Monty Python, and then I...and I then began to sort of notice...I don't remember whether I really noticed or whether I was just imagining it, that he was really sort of quiet and boring anyway, do you know what I mean, it just seemed, seemed to fit along with it, but whether that was just really, you know....

H7: Yes...open-minded...

H5: Yes...I couldn't really...you did get, used to get a lot of comments if you used to be talking about (?) or something...there'd often be one person in the group that would say 'oh, that's horrible'...you always seemed to get, always seemed to get one person that, especially at school...you'd be doing, you know, mucking about, and, like you say reciting bits out of the sketches or something...did you ever see that one' or 'did you ever hear that one?' or whatever, and there'd always be one person going 'oh, why do you want to look at that...' and yet, to me, that put me off that person, even though they might have been the nicest person going, I was sort of...you know I thought 'you're so boring and staid...'

Q: Do you think it...would you also have associated it with age?

H5: I don't think so because when I got into it I was...yes I was in second or third year at junior school, and me and my friend got into it and a few of the friends at school, but it seemed to be a more...it certainly seemed a more adult humour because we played it in junior school once, we used to have a record session at the end of the day or something, and the teacher found it really funny, and the four of us found it really, so I think it was five of us that found it really funny, and all the other...classroom of kids were looking blankly; they couldn't understand it, it sort of went right over their heads, and there was just like our little crowd really laughing, and the teacher really finding it funny, but, to them, it just went over their heads, and I found...I suppose I found it was normally people older than me at the time, When I was at junior school, yet, there was people...only a minority of people my age liked it, it was more older people; perhaps that's what attracted it to me as well, I don't know... 'cos it was older people, 'cos it was like, my dad enjoyed it, and my mum enjoyed it, and my sisters enjoyed it, and I found it funny, so it made me feel perhaps a bit more grown up...

Q: Well that's interesting because...I think...a lot of people would say that the thing they liked was that the peer-group would enjoy it but maybe their parents and the next generation didn't...

H5: ...to me, it's the other way round...but then I've always been a bit...I've always wanted to be older than I was...not now, not now!...the age I am, but when I was...(laughter)...

now I don't want to get any older, but...when I was younger I can always remember I never really wanted to be, I enjoyed having friends and everything, you know...my friends, but I always wanted to be that bit older, I always seemed to be interested in things that bit older than what people expected me to be interested in, and...the cause of that I used to have a wide range of friends from an early age who were all different ages, not all...one age group...so perhaps that was just an individual thing the fact that...I liked it because me dad liked it ...

H7: I think now, because of the time-span that it's been on, there's obviously a wider age-group of people that appreciate it now, but at the time, maybe that age-group was a lot slimmer...I'd certainly appreciate it more now than I did when I was younger...I liked it...but I found it perhaps fascinating when I was younger...

H5: I found when I was younger it taught me a hell of a lot as well...

H7: ...I find it a lot more humorous and enjoyable (on the whole) now...

Q: I think that could...perhaps...I don't know what that depends on because I've had...most people say, most people who saw it at the time say that they feel it's dated a lot, now they don't find it nearly so funny...one or two other people have said, like you...but the other person I'm thinking of in particular is forty-one or something, and didn't see very much of it at the time, he just saw one or two, but now he's seen a few of these things on...he finds it so good...so it seems to be something...

H5: You've had so many things in between times that have gone along the lines of Monty Python...you've had so many things good and bad, that now when you see the really old episodes, perhaps they do look a bit dated, just purely because you've had so much other stuff that you've...enjoyed a lot of...

H7: ...you tend to forget the original...

H5: ...that's right, and you begin to think well, when you see it again you tend to think well that's been done before, but it's been done by the copiers of Monty Python, but you...d'you know what I mean, you sort of...you sort of think well, I've seen that type of person come on before in another sketch in Not The Nine O'clock News or...

H7: ...as I say when I was at school people used to sort of recite it parrot-fashion, and I used to actually find it a bit boring then probably because I wasn't sitting watching them doing it, I was listening to somebody repeating it badly and...not putting it over as well...

Q: Yes I wonder what the pleasure was or is of learning things like that...

H7: I don't know but I can think of two or three people at school that used to...

H5: But a lot of people...people do it now, it's almost as if to say, you know, are you in the club of the Monty Python fans, sort of thing...

H7: ...they're not sort of laughing doing it, or anything...

H5: ...'cos if you say something now, someone, you know, someone says something and you think oh they're fishing to see who

...sort of knows...

END OF RECORDING.

TAPE 2: L10, L17

L10: ...yes...I think I'm a little more...looser than I was when I came in...a little more...happier.

Q: Yes...and watching it...did that...

L10: Yes. yes...

Q: I mean I've got a few things written down, a few specific sort of points which I'd like to get round to but we could start off with some...generally...how did you find it..?

L17: I liked the length of each item...for me they weren't too long, but long enough to hold your interest even if the particular type of humour in it didn't particularly appeal to me...it always held my interest.

L10: Yes.

Q: Why do you think it held your interest; what particular elements do you think might have...

L17: I think for me, the fact...I like the personas of the people in Monty Python anyway, I like seeing them in other things ...like Eric Idle in the Mikado, Terry Jones in chat shows, and things like that...

Q: ...you've seen the Mikado...

L17: Yes. So...I feel that I like them as people even though I don't know them at all...so that helps...

Q: Do you think that...one question that puzzles me is the distinction, if there is a distinction, between something that's funny...the pleasure of finding something funny, and the other sorts of pleasures like recognizing an actor or a performer, or a comedian you like, that's actually pleasurable but can one then say it's ...funny...

L10: Yes I...was going to ask you actually, because that form I found actually quite hard to answer, because it was specifically 'funny'; and a lot of that I didn't find funny; I found it absorbing, and I found it quite interesting, especially the first one...

L17: ...yes...I put '1' for the first one, but I found it clever, but I didn't find it...funny...

L10: Yes...I didn't find it funny...but I also found it hard on scale...I found myself on the scale being somewhat accommodating, you know what I mean? I thought well...it was enjoyable so I kind of gave it a higher mark...than I actually felt that it was funny. The first one was a good example of that...I liked it...

Q: Yes...yes. So that distinction between pleasure and funniness is a real one...a difficulty in a way, isn't it...

L10: Yes...yes. And I noticed as well that wherever there was something with John Cleese I enjoyed it much more...but I also found it funnier; but I'm not sure why that was; as I was watching it and as I was noticing it I was wondering, is it because it is John Cleese and I associate certain things

with John Cleese, or is it actually because it is funnier... I find, I think, I think it is actually because he is funnier, because his commercials on television I don't find funny at all, but that's John Cleese, but his timing in this, and he seemed to have better lines, probably because he wrote his own lines, and his timing is very good.

Q: But it's interesting that you say you don't find the commercials funny because in a sense what you said at the beginning, you know if you see somebody that you do basically find funny, the chances are, you'll find it at least slightly funny...amusing

E10: Right...right.

Q: ...so it obviously is also dependent on what's actually there...

E10: ...the material...

Q: If you're predisposed by...you're probably more likely to find it funny...

What about the parts of the film, I mean which parts did you generally find more enjoyable or funny, I mean we can talk about both...

E17: I liked the 'Every sperm is sacred' one which, I'd heard about it before, friends had seen it, though, but with that one, it didn't really detract, there was so much going on, the singing and dancing, whereas the one where, the fat man exploded, the fact that I knew the punchline in that probably detracted from it...

Q: You think it did, I mean how did you respond to it otherwise?

E17: I think I...made allowances for it...it wasn't...I didn't think that was an (event) I really got pleasure out of, I didn't like just the sickness...I didn't find that at all funny...

E10: I didn't either...I just thought it was gross

Q: You were laughing at it though...

E10: Well I was laughing at John Cleese I think...again. Because I felt that he was very...I was laughing at him and I was laughing at the parody, you know, of waiters...I found myself doing that quite a lot, actually, I was laughing at what it was getting at but not actually it

E17: Yes I find that as well, like the Hawaiian...meal...reminded me stately homes...trying to get tourists in...

L10: ...or these things in London, you know these London dungeon... things like that...I found myself laughing at what, almost what it implied, but not actually at the lines...I also found, a similar example was the...the birth, birth? where she was you know? I thought that was hilarious...

L17: I was relating it to my own experiences in hospital and everything...~~made me~~ <sup>rather than make</sup> laughing. I suppose it did trigger off something else...

L10: It was funny too because I was just reading something about birth, and about natural childbirth ...and stuff and there was film of, I was watching a film of a German, the way they give birth in German maternity hospitals, and it was identical to that...literally...in that everything was mechanical, everything was machine...every birth in Germany is forced, because they only give birth between nine in the morning and six in the evening, when the hospitals are open,

...you know this was an absolute parody of...

Q: ...so there again, you're in a different position, having read that...you'll find that funny in a different way from a lot of other people...

L10: right...right.

Q: Something you raised just now, which reminded me of the distinction between jokes and other kinds of humour or comedy...I was talking to (L21) yesterday and that came up; there's not very much in the way of jokes, you know in terms of stand-up comedians, telling a joke...can you think in terms of jokes with a film like this?

L17: The opposite, I kept thinking sometimes of, you know, I was thinking I wish they'd have a few one-liners, just to sort of, you know, get me going again, that I am liking the idea of what's going on but you know, it's not, the individual lines just aren't quite funny enough.

Q: Yes...I think there are points where there are a few lines...

L10: I can't think of any but I'm sure there were...

L17: I mean some of them, quite a few of them...proportion came in the songs.

Q: I think even...in the Liver Transplant thing, I mean...yes, I mean, can one call them jokes, when the kid comes in and just casually says 'Cheerio see you later'...I mean is that a 'joke'? There is an argument for saying that it is, but...

I think...another thing that can replace, I'd like to know how you feel about, is when 'smut' shall we say, just showing a bottom or talking about penises or something like that, do you feel that that can sometimes be a source of comedy without it being in the context of...

L17: I was just thinking, when I was actually watching it, you know if I'd actually seen it when it came out I would maybe have found it funnier...the bare-breasted women running after the guy, things like that, whereas now, just think maybe in a few years we've become more jaded with things like that, more...

L10: I was thinking the same thing...actually...somehow Monty Python humour aged very quickly...or they're superseded by other...other things...you know like...what was it, that man, Smith and Jones...

Q: Not The Nine O'clock News?

L10: The History Of the Cinema, you know, The History...somehow there was a similarity between that and this...and, well, the bare-breasted women...

Q: Yes...that's another thing I was going to ask is...how particular, in particular issues, the fact that you might feel strongly about something, whether it might be feminism, a sort of feminism, reacting to images of women, or it might be specific things like illness...you might have a relative who is ill or recently died or something, and then... somebody was saying to me that the coffin, when this sort of corpse gets up, and says 'and mine' actually did upset them a bit, simply because it reminded them of somebody having just died, so I mean how...

L17: I think...again...maybe I was analysing that because my father actually has cancer at the moment and I was wondering why...if that was because I wasn't really enjoying the

Grim Reaper one... but I don't think so...

L10: ...I just didn't particularly like the 'Grim Reaper' in fact..

L17: ...it was a bit unsubtle...wasn't it...and it was like the one joke whent en...OK they were sending up that type of sort of behaviour, the American and English middle-class behaviour, but again I kept wanting some nice one-liners, or something...

L10: ...and I felt like I'd seen it before, as well...like it had been done before...

L17: I did like it when they went to heaven and all the people from the rest of the film were there...I did like that... although they didn't do anything with them except have them there, that wasthe beginning and end of the joke...

Q: I noticed...I mean I was wondering...sometimes the same actor is there twice; at one point Terry Jones is one of the women in the Grim Reaper sequence, he's also on the screen, his back is there, as the liver donor's wife...but that obviously is..somebody else shot from the other side... but going back to that, I mean, say the images of women, for instances, I maen,..is there a problem with some of the gags?

L17: Not in that...that's not...I don't find...

L10: I don't know...Yes there is and at the same time I just kind of let it go by; I mean I found that exploding fat man really gross...and I also found myself looking at, looking at his remains, you know to see how much they were giving...you know what I mean...like just exactly how much blood and guts are they going to give us...but I didn't, I didn't...I didn't find that offensive but I didn't like it either...and I felt the same about the liver, the liver transplant...where I actually felt, I actually kind of felt that something had left me...you know that feeling...(?)...as he was pulling these bits out and cutting them off...

Q: ...you find yourself sort of...

L10: ...yes...(laughing) I....(?) myself, you have this feeling that it was actually like...I didn't like it but at the same time it...it wasn't revolting...it was...it wasn't even kind of particularly close to, it hard actually to describe, how I felt about it...

Q: Because in a way it is fairly you could say explicit, I mean you don't actually see the body being hacked up...

L10: In a way it's fairly explicit but at the same time it's done so tongue in cheek, because it's so over the top...

L17: ...and like the woman, I mean, most of the womens' roles and that are men dressed up as women, and you look at them and you see they're men dressed up, they're not really supposed to be representing women...

Q: Yes...yes, I think that's quite a crucial point...that as far as, there are two points, I mean,..I don't know, maybe you should comment on this...where I felt a bit uneasy about sort of the fact that representations of women are the women chasing the bloke at the end, practically naked,...

L17: ...there again, it's through his eyes, that is very much his fantasy, he's not...the film's not really saying women are like this...

Q: ...yes...but I mean it's...

L17: but I didn't like the camera shot on the on the woman's, sort of...breasts going up and down, but again, I thought well, the excuse, it's supposed to be this man's fantasy...

Q: Yes, I mean he's convicted of making...but I mean, I thought that's a bit of a cheap...get-out, isn't it, of making cheap sexist jokes in a motion picture...what are you doing then? (agreement from others). And also the graphics when Eric Idle's singing the song, about halfway through, when they step out of the liver-donor's house...

L10: The graphics of being...of birth.

Q: Yes

L10: I vaguely remember that...

L17: I didn't mind that, I thought it was quite (clever/good) actually...

L10: Yes...I thought the one at the beginning was very clever...

Q: Yes, I enjoyed it...

L10: No...I didn't find that...

Q: ...because...there seems something aggressive or violent... about it, the way in which she's impregnated...  
As you say, the men in drag...makes it in a sense different...like for instance the woman...the cleaning-woman...in the Mr Creosote, exploding Mr Creosote...being vomited over...some people objected to...you didn't feel...

L17: I just...I didn't like that whole idea that...it was presumably supposed to be very funny that this guy kept vomiting and vomiting...

L10: No, I didn't particularly like it...

Q: I don't know if this, I mean is it worth asking why...or... why do you think some people would find it funny?

L17: I suppose that some...some people's humour's a bit more, sense of humour's a bit more basic than mine, but I mean I can...laugh at slapstick-type humour as well, I don't know...

Q: Then what is...

L17: I sometimes do find jokes about bodily functions funny, sometimes I don't...

Q: Yes, because that's what I mean, what is a more basic sense of humour?

L17: I mean there just doesn't seem to be anything apart from, that was the joke, it wasn't in any other context, OK he was being sick so as he could make room for something else, but you know there just didn't seem enough to it, you know, he just was being sick all the time...

L10: Mm. I mean I find it, I find it...amusing, because I kind of...as a parody of high-class restaurants, and if you've ever been to a high-class restaurant where the waiters are so pernickety, they put the napkin in your lap and stuff... and then if you imagine this big fat guy vomiting in a restaurant like that, then it's hilarious...but without that part of me in it, I wouldn't have found it funny...without what I brought to it...you know...

Q: I mean in a sense you're back to something I raised earlier

on about pure, just 'smut' being funny, in a sexual sense, you're saying the same thing about bodily functions, in a way, just the fact that you show it can be funny and... that's what I'm interested in; when is it funny...in what circumstances is it funny just for the bodily function to be mentioned or shown, and when does it need to be in a context? ...a 'joke' context...

L17: I suppose quite often if the humour has been a bit sophisticated and then suddenly joke is dropped in, like bodily function or whatever, it is funny just for the... contrast of what's gone before, the sheer unexpectedness of it...whereas that, it was straight into the sketch and that was it, there was this fat man wandering in and...being sick...

Q: But I did, as I said I noticed that you were laughing... at that very point...but as then you also said...it was more John Cleese...

L10: I didn't like the way that sketch ended 'fellow me'...I found that quite a lot, with this one actually...I hadn't seen this one, the last film I saw was the Life of Brian, which I did enjoy, because it was more cohesive, it made more sense as a story, as a plot... and this I found quite disappointing... because a lot of the ideas it seemed to me could have been great, and had great moments, but didn't quite achieve complete...greatness...

Q: Why would that be? What would they have needed?

L10: Well, to develop them, to develop things more, or keep them going longer, in a lot of cases; I really enjoyed the...John Cleese's sex education class, I thought that was very funny, and I...I particularly liked the way, the kids' reaction to it, just boredom, and...I thought that was very...but it could have had more to it, it could have gone on longer or it could have been developed...there were so many things like that, it was a great idea and then it would be backed up or something and then there'd be a filler...like the... what was the Yorkshire sketch?...the Semen song...

L17: 'Every Sperm is Sacred'

L10: 'Every Sperm is Sacred'...I mean I didn't, I didn't...I liked it, I liked it, but I didn't like the song, and I thought the song went on far too long

Q: Really?

L10: Yes...

Q: Yes... I half share that, I felt the song was great when it was indoors, but then when it gets outdoors it just sort of...

L10: ...right...

L17: I thought that was good, like the men coming out of the toilets and...things like that, just sort of sending up... something that's subtly choreographed...

L10: Yes...

Q: Yes, I think that's...that's right, maybe that's why there's that switch; I didn't appreciate that so much but I can see that it's a different, it's aiming at a different...it's a send-up of that, as opposed to what was happening indoors, which was, you're listening to the words of the song, that's what the joke was about...



L10: Right...right...

Q: Um...another thing...do you, sort of, how do you feel about exaggeration? Can you think of any examples of exaggeration from this film?

L17: Well the man exploding...(?) and exploding...

Q: Let's have some more, let's have some more!

L17: ...(not) the people I knew! (laughter)...eh the children in the Yorkshire scene...

L10: Yes the children...

L17: the fact that it was sex education and people would not actually have sex in a public school like that to actually illustrate the sex...the birds and the bees, would they...

Q: When do you think the exaggeration works as comedy?...think about some of these, I mean, if the exploding Mr Creosote is exaggeration and it doesn't work for you, whereas something like let's say that sex-education or 'Every Sperm is Sacred' ...exaggerated numbers of kids...

L17: There's a small leap for my imagination, you know to make; well, not so much the number of kids, obviously, but the... in the sex-education one,..(?)...it's the next step, you know,...some of the jokes come from, whereas the exploding man...I don't know...

Q: Is it something to do with the amount of exaggeration?...do you think?

L17: It varies from sketch to sketch...

L10: It's a difficult one; like...yes...for example the bit that sticks in my mind is when they cut the baby's umbilical cord, and this is exaggeration, right, but it was so...quick and sharp...it was exaggerated, but it wasn't overexaggerated, it wasn't extended, like overexaggeration, he could have done it ten times, perhaps, but it was so quick you could almost have missed it, but it was an exaggeration and it worked... that was a good example of exaggeration working...and not going any further.

And then, exaggeration not working...

L17: Exaggeration working, where it worked very well, was the sketch in the Zulu wars, where the officers are (?) about their own things, pursuing their own interests, when there's a war raging round about...(?) from other films, that is the impression that you get, is the men do the fighting, the officers who give the commands, I found that easy to sort of. I think it was the exaggeration that made me laugh...

Q: I think yes, I mean that's where exaggeration and understatement sort of come together...I mean understatement is exaggeration in the opposite direction isn't it...having your leg bitten off and...'It's just a scratch'...(laughter)

L10: I mean the rugby match was an example of exaggeration too...

L17: I didn't find it funny.

Q: You didn't.

L17: No...

L10: That's interesting, I think you'd have had to have gone to public school to find that really funny...perhaps, or you'd have had to play rugby...as a kid...

Q: Yes, yes...when you say you didn't find it funny...

- L17: Because I just thought it would be fairly obvious that the masters were from...an idea that was a comedy...I don't know, I just thought that it was so obvious that the masters would cheat and trample the boys...
- Q: But it's not, visually seeing it doesn't...there's a difference between knowing that it's sort of happening...
- L17: No, I didn't find it at all...funny...because it was just, for me...it could probably just have been the same shot repeated of him getting the ball over the line...in fact I would probably have found it funnier if they'd just kept showing the same shot...(?)...
- Q: Let's see if there's anything else on my list...  
Yes...I mea...what ...why do you think some people actually do respond to Monty Python ...films much more than other groups of people, what do you think makes the difference I mean if you had to put people into two groups...
- L17: You mean why do people vote labour and why some people vote tory...
- Q: Yes but even with that question you could come up with some pointers, couldn't you...
- L17: Yes, you can, yes...
- L10: I always had a, I don't know, I always had a feeling that Monty Python was somehow split into two camps, those people who were somehow very repressed, and were, kind of enjoyed seeing what was repressed acted out, and those people who, at the other end of the scale, who somehow lived and talked about Monty Python anyway, also enjoyed it, who weren't necessarily repressed, and so on...
- Q: well the pleasures are...different...what sorts of pleasures do you think are going on?
- L10: umm...in some ways I suppose seeing yourself, or seeing...
- Q: What would you think...
- L17: I just don't know...I would just..it wouldn't hold for now, but I remember when it was originally on, and people at school, it was very much a one-upmanship, it wouldn't have mattered what was on, because it was quite a battle to get your parents to let you to watch it in the first place, and I suppose it's because it was so different from anything, any other comedy that was on, at the time...if you weren't able to act it out in the playground next day, (?) one of the (?)...
- L10: Yes, yes, that's true...
- Q: Yes, but then, so you think it's the novelty, but I mean perhaps that doesn't help because there are plenty of programmes that are on that...
- L17: No, I know, it's not...
- L10: I think, I think that's the right word, I think a lot of Monty Python was novelty...
- L17: ...definitely, at the time...
- L10: ...at the time, which is like what I said earlier, why it appears so dated now...
- L17: Mainly the animation, you know that was...I don't remember seeing any animation like that before...and the opening as

well, which is why my father didn't like to watch it, what was it, the man, the nude man playing the piano, you didn't sort of tend to get that on the BBC...

L10: ...right, right...BBC2 it was as well, wasn't it...

Q: Yes...it's interesting because I was talking to somebody yester...somebody else yesterday...who said he hadn't seen it when it first came out...really at all...the series, yes, the original series, and then he saw it about three or four weeks ago, this repeat series, and he was rolling around on the floor...

L10: ...really?

Q: I mean he...his words were, that he felt, although he hadn't really seen it when it was out, <sup>he'd</sup> it hadn't ~~really~~ dated...

L10: That's very interesting...

Q: That's what I thought, I thought, most people have said to me, and I have kind of the feeling as well that it...some of it is... the pleasure I get from it now is more of recognition something familiar...

L10: But I watched it with my, like the four flat-people of my house last week when it was on, and we all turned it off, because we couldn't watch it...yes, it was just like (?)... I'm sure it was funny at least ten years ago...

L17: Yes, the film that was on Christmas New Year time, I tried to watch that and...although again the familiarity, thinking about the parrot sketch, the dead parrot sketch...but I just.. I just thought oh no...I mean we were watching it on a small black and white TV, that's not ideal...but I expected to enjoy it far more than I actually did...some of it just seemed to have no structure at all, you just felt when they were writing it that you just didn't really know what they were getting at...they were deliberately trying to baffle you...

Q: Well yes, but I mean that's the thing, at the time...

L17: ...obviously at the time it was so different...

Q: it was so different, that's why it worked so well...whereas now it's fairly commonplace for programmes to be doing this...

L10: Right...but in some ways I don't think I ever found Fawltly T...Monty Python that funny...I just said Fawltly Towers because I was going to say, I found Fawltly Towers very funny, and I still do...I can still watch it again and again, and find it so funny that it hurts...but I've never had that with Monty Python...

Q: ...and the reason for that...

L10: Well presumably John Cleese, the material and the timing...

Q: ...I think the timing and the acting...something about it...

L10: ...and also because it's so sustained...Monty Python, that was my main criticism. If this was that, you know something gets going, and it gets moving, and then it jumps, or it stops completely, or there's a...animation...

Q: Q: Yes...I guess... the fact that it was episodic like that; I mean if...if it was <sup>actually</sup> completely surreal, like the original television programmes, maybe it'd have a chance of working in a different way...you get a different pleasure from it just leaping around in a completely unexpected directions

but here you soon get used to the idea that it's episodes, coming one after the other...

L10: Right...right...

Q: Let's see...do you think the fact that you were part of an experiment had any effect on your appreciation...

L17: For me, only that I kept thinking, am I enjoying this one more or less than the other one that I think I'll probably give the same mark to...that was all...

L10: For me, only insofar as I kept asking myself, is this funny? ...that it was interesting to see the difference between 'is this funny?' and 'is this amusing' or entertaining...

L17: You tend to do that anyway, when you're watching comedy TV...

L10: Yes...well I think I only notice if something's really funny when something is suddenly very funny...because so much of the time comedy isn't actually all that funny on television... and then when something is very funny you suddenly...(?)... very clever comedy...

Q: Do either of you watch much, say, situation comedy?

L10: No...not really...I mean the last thing I watched was ... (cinema)...Mel Smith, Smith and Jones...

Q: Do you watch much?

L17: I try and...I watch more of...sort of things, like that... but not actually sitcoms, very much at all; I saw the first episode of that...pretty idiotic...a review of it...set in a cafe run by a gay guy...and I couldn't believe how bad it was; I don't think I've ever seen, although I don't regularly watch sitcoms so I can't tell, but for me it was on a par, an episode I saw of one, it was set in a left-wing borough,

Q: Ah...what was that called...something 'Citizen Smith'?

L17: No...no, 'Citizen Smith', was that not the one, with the guy, I mean I found that very funny, with Robert Lindsey, but this is one, I can't remember, this guy that went on to be in or about the same time as one of those Indian things...this guy turned out to be homosexual and I can't remember, he's got a hyphenated name, Tim...Tim Piggott-Smith! It was awful, they sort of say, we're going to set up a community for you know, one-legged black lesbians, and there's all this canned laughter going 'ha ha ha'...it's having experiences like that that makes me very wary of watching...I watch so little TV, I tend not even to give, give things a chance, I see a trailer for, I've seen sort of like a trailer of two minutes of Duty Free and I think well I'm never ever going to watch that

Q: ...I'm exactly the same, actually...

L10: It's funny, mostly if I watch comedy programmes it's because somebody has recommended it...I won't just turn it on...

Q: Or else if you've read about it perhaps, I mean, in something that, you sort of feel, oh, somebody's found out some...I mean I was reading this book called 'Family Television' by David Morley, where he's done some research in London about how people watch television; when, how, how decisions are taken and...what they're doing at the same time as they're watching, these things...and under sitcom, virtually, most of the people, most of the sample, one sitcom most of them watch are, is...I've forgotten what it is!...(?)...Only Fools and Horses.

- L17: I wouldn't, if I saw that I would do it more by the writer, I'd watch something by John Sullivan, I'd watch something, I'd give a try with something by Carla Lane...
- L10: But as I...I think I'm...your other question, actually I often find things which aren't supposed to be necessarily funny funnier than the comedies, like Dallas I find incredibly funny...but I'm not sure that it's meant to be...and also Hill Street Blues...there are moments in that which I find actually a lot better than a whole half-hour of ready-made comedy...
- Q: ...which also brings us, brings us back to the definition of comedy and pleasure...there must be a sort of overlap...mixed with other pleasures...
- L10: right...right.
- Q: Because a thought that crossed my mind on several occasions was that I mean The Meaning of Life, I mean I've always assumed it is a comedy, but then there is running through it this kind of 'critique' of certain assumptions, of certain kinds of, you know, social behaviours, institutions, assumptions of what's...heterosexual, sex education, and everything...in a way, you know there's a strand running through it which is...which is relatively serious as well.
- L10: It's quite scathing, actually...and also it's quite...quite angry...
- Q: Yes, I mean I suppose that's one of the reasons I personally like the opening song as well...
- L10: ...the corporate take-over...the insurance...
- Q: No I mean the opening song, of the actual main film, the theme, well, title song...
- L17: The same as they have at the end...
- Q: Yes the title song...
- L17: I didn't notice, remember that was at the beginning as well...
- Q: No, no...the one at the end is the, is the liver donor..song whereas at the beginning, you've got the sort of title song...the whole thing...
- L17: What is it?
- L10: I missed out on that as well! (laughter) How come I didn't...
- L17: Sing it!
- (Q: brief attempt to render start of song; the beginning of HAP Section 2 was then replayed on the tape; comments during this were mostly inaudible)
- Q: Right, well, that's all really that I wanted to raise, we've covered all the points I had in mind, so unless there's anything else you want to...
- L17: I just thought I'd better say that I've indicated that I was in pain at the end and not at the beginning, but it was nothing at all to do with the film, just the wine triggered my hiatus hernia, but I don't think it affected my viewing because I've been in incredible stomach pain before and still thoroughly enjoyed things, (laughter) maybe half a point up for each thing, that's all...just in case you looked and you thought, what!
- Q: Yes...thanks for telling me!

L10: There's a strange...strange answer here!

Q: Because...I mean I... I haven't looked at, the only one I've looked at was the very first one that a friend did, a friend over from Germany filled this in for me as a dummy run, and I looked through her's, and I thought, God this is great, you know there were not that many changes, but I mean out of the hundred words maybe fifteen or so had changed, and a lot of them were words to do with anxiety, being relaxed, she was less relaxed, she was more anxious...all those things tended to correlate, I thought, God! It worked!...for that particular subject it seems to have...but the thing to do will be to look at whether that is reproduced across any kind of range, whether you get some people who systematically feel more anxious, or less anxious, or whether there are any..

L17: Plus I suppose, it'd be different as well if people, well you can't really do it for this film, probably, but in a normal sort of undemanding feature film, if people came straight from work, sort of all tensed up, the film might give them the chance to wind down whereas you're doing this on Saturdays, aren't you, and people might already feel relaxed...to get here at half past six is a dash straight from work, but it's not the kind of film that you say, you expect people to be more relaxed after anyway...

Q: But that's very true, that the circumstances, you know, when somebody walks in, there are other reasons for being more or less relaxed other than just the film, that's right...

L10: That's...yes, I was thinking, too, if I had just come in and sat here and we'd talked for two hours...

Q: I guess what we <sup>ought to</sup> do is have a leaving session, just to make sure everybody's equally... 'cos I mean that's one of the things that some of the research that people did with these Mood Adjective Check Lists, when they were developing them a few years ago, was that they did controls, they actually did the work the other way round, to actually work out how these Mood Adjective Check Lists worked, they used certain types of films, which they assumed had certain effects, so they were doing it the other way round...as a control, they used to show...what they reckoned was a really boring film...I'm suspicious of that, you, know, something like 'Farming in Iowa' or something like that, something with just cows walking around a field, somebody talking about the size of the fields, stuff like that...but that has effects on people...make people feel more...maybe irritated or bored or something...Right, thank you very much...

#### TAPE 2: L21

Q: I've jotted down a few...things that could structure what we say about it, but I mean...I can't, I haven't looked at the questionnaire but I mean, you would say you like Monty Python's stuff, would you...

L21: Yes...yes...I wouldn't say it's their best film; probably Life of Brian I would say was about their best...

Q: Yes...so what is it you particularly like about the other stuff?

L21: Can't remember what I put in the questionnaire!

Q: Yes but that doesn't matter...

L21: I thought about, I actually sat down and thought, why I like Monty Python...I'm a bit drowsy at the moment, can't actually think about...they seem to attack social convention, and they break the taboos that society sort of sets up...the way that they do it is funny, also the way that anything can happen, one minute you'll have one scene, the next minute something completely...

Q: ...different!

L21: completely different or out of the ordinary...also the way scenes continue on from each other, one scene's completely different to the other, tags on with some sort of connecting piece...the actors are quite good, I wouldn't say, a lot of people think John Cleese is pretty good, I don't think he's that funny; Michael Palin I think is pretty funny...and Eric Idle I think is pretty good. It's basically the ideas they put into it as well...

Q: What...in what way would you say then that if you don't think Meaning of Life is as good as some of the other things, what is it, in what ways does it fall short of the rest?

L21: It's certainly as original as their other pieces...there's obviously a lot of idea and work has been put into it...but...I don't know...it's just...there just isn't the sense of...of the comedy that was present in the other films, I can't really sort of centre onto anything...the Life of Brian as...and I'm not particularly...towards religion, I don't particularly believe in religion, and the way that they attacked it in Life of Brian I thought was particularly funny...

Q: I mean...so, thinking about the questionnaire, is it likely that you might have ticked first...I can't remember the words on the questionnaire but sort of you know like 'attack on convention' or something like that...

L21: Possibly...

Q: ...you might have put that first then, yes...because...another question would be, do you see a difference between finding something funny, between you know, comedy, finding something funny, something amusing, and other kinds of pleasure?...liking films for other reasons...I mean, 'cos that's something that puzzles me that, you know is there a big difference between the two...there seems to be a sort of blurring...

L21: ...the difference between if, whether I enjoy comedy film and a film that isn't comedy...

Q: Well, not only that, but even in a comedy film, I mean what is it that...that one actually enjoys about comedy...

L21: If I was to make a list of say my top ten films, there wouldn't be a comedy film in there...comedy is good for a brief moment of relief, of light entertainment; usually when you watch a comedy film for a second time, (I'm) aware what's happening, it's not as funny...Life of Brian would probably be an exception, Time Bandits probably another exception...but...it's, because you're expecting the joke and as you're aware of the ending to it, and the way it's presented, it's not as funny...usually comedy is not so artistic as other forms of film, which, for me, watching a film more than once is for it's artistic quality, which is usually lacking in a comedy film; the jokes would probably be the only artistic quality in the film, and as I said hearing a joke the second time, the artistic quality is lost.

- Q: I mean, yes, the word 'joke', so what do you think of as 'jokes' in a film, I mean talking about Meaning of Life... what do you understand by 'jokes' in a film like that?
- L21: Um...difficult...there wasn't really that much I would have... I imagined it to be funny when I first saw it, but seeing it this time there wasn't really that much I would say was exceptionally funny...possibly the last sketch\*...the one with the fat man at the table, basically because it's an attack on the posh people, how the...the way that they isolate themselves from the fat person eating at the table, and also the...it's a bit crude, but the way that he's being sick, is...you don't usually see that in a film, it's original...funny way of being original, but it's a...you don't usually see it to that extent being portrayed in a film...
- Q: ...that's right, yes...What I was, one of the things I was getting at about pleasure is, I mean, where it mixes with comedy is, as you said, you like Michael Palin and Eric Idle in particular, so if you were watching something with them in, whether it's Life of Brian or Meaning of Life, presumably I mean, how did you feel about seeing them in Meaning of Life?
- L21: Eric Idle I don't think was that good in this one, we didn't see that much of him; Michael Palin I thought was good, his facial expressions and his, just complete over-acting. I think John Cleese, there's a touch of seriousness sometimes in his acting which tends to destroy the sort of zany bit... don't know whether that answered the...question or not...
- Q: Yes, well, what I'm trying to get at is...sort of...as you said, it's good, it's what makes it funny as well, isn't it... you know, if you like watching Michael Palin, then it adds to it being funny...
- L21: ...you take the scene where they're doing the marching in the square, it's Michael Palin's facial expressions I think, in that, and the way that he just bellows, bellows his voice out, that actually I think makes that scene...there's nothing else but Michael Palin in that scene...
- Q: That's right, yes...so that's what I'm sort of in a sense trying to, one of the things I'm trying to untangle is sort of, the fact that there might be a joke, I mean in some cases there'll be a joke even, that one can laugh at, in other cases there's...a performance, which is funny...
- L21: Yes...mainly, in a comedy film I wouldn't say so much a joke, it's more visual, in a film; if you, don't know, watch something like Saturday Live, which you're probably aware of, then that's when I would say, more the actual spoken joke would be more funny, but in a film I'd say 99% it's more visual...it wouldn't really be a film if it was just ...bloke reading off jokes here and there...unless you would sort of...I suppose the Marx Brothers, that's where more, the spoken joke I think is more appreciated.
- Q: Don't you think, I'm just, to take that further, don't you think there are things within...I'm just trying to think of an example which I haven't...done...before; say the live organ

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\* L21 was the respondent with whom there was insufficient time in which to view the entire film.(cf Fig.1 above)



transplants one, when for instance John Cleese turns round and says 'I thought she'd never ask'...just a line like that could be taken as a joke line, or don't you think so?

L21: I didn't find that funny at all! I think the basic, for that actual scene I think there was the basic concept for that... they could possibly come along and take your organs while you're alive, and the actual, the way that, when he answered, the person answered the door and he said, well, it's inconvenient, busy...

Q: 'I'm using it', yes...

L21: Yes...there I think that was the only thing that was funny in that scene...

Q: I'll think of another example! Umm...in the school, there would be points like...like the bloke who has the...the board-duster chucked at him, an example of...

L21: ...if you think about lines, I suppose one that will probably be more vivid would probably be 'Fighting each other', when there's, they're being killed off one by one, and he's asking them to go and get...things, and that's where the actual spoken joke I think was more funny, although the presenting of the clocks, the visual joke, was also funny as well...

Q: Yes...that, I mean, we could talk about something else as well, but I mean, that does puzzle me, the sort of, there's the sort of, obviously a stand-up joke, which you don't find in these sorts of films, but there are...in what...what do certain lines in this kind of film have in common with stand-up jokes, you know, in the sense one is still watching and listening, and there's a kind of line that comes across which...which would be funny...which has something like the same structure, it's a gag, a sort of verbal gag...

Which...actually, before looking at that, I mean, which do you find, which did you find funnier, the material dealing with sex, the first section, or sort of mutilation of the body material?...fighting each other and the sort of leg chopped off...

L21: Out of all the scenes it would probably be the 'Autumn Years', the last one...the same with sex, it was, the use of actual language was a bit heavy-handed, a bit explicit, to make the actual sort of, the actual sex sort of um comic...it was too sort of serious...the one with the organs, I imagined it as being quite funny, but seeing it this time I suppose I, my expectations made it slightly more serious, and particularly the bits where he's actually holding the organs in his hand and he's trying to cut...(?) I found a bit repulsive...

Q: But what, so turning that the other way round, can you...I mean, you're trying to account for why you might have found it, or you remember finding it funnier the first time...why do you think that was? You just said why you didn't find it so funny this time, but why would you have found it funny the first time...

L21: I don't know whether...turn it (?)...I saw this on video directly after seeing Dawn of the Dead, which might have an effect on my reactions towards that scene... 'cos that was a horror, sort of black comedy, horror comic, and I, it's just...sometimes, well I watch a lot of horror films, sort of, about ten times more than any other type of film, and it's just the actual, it's different to the horror film I'd

usually see, you know, when I see it, it'll be serious, someone actually being murdered by a killer or something... and it's just the way that they come, these two medics come in with ease, it's just something natural to them... the way that they're just taking the organs out, I suppose the first time I would have thought was funny... and the actual sort of ... this is expanding a little bit more... his life is considered insignificant...

Q: What about your own feelings... I mean on a kind of visceral level, your own kind of reaction to seeing... I suppose you've already answered this question but... to actually seeing the liver being lifted out, the body being... being mangled...

L21: As... I mean I'm quite hardened to something like that... I did say 'repulsive' a couple of minutes earlier, but I wasn't repulsed... to turn away or be violently ill or something... but that's probably from seeing so many horror films, you sort of become punch drunk to them...

Q: ...but you didn't find it funny... this time round...

L21: No... I did find it watchable and comic in the sort of context of the rest of the film, but I wasn't sort of wheeling about in laughter... but I wasn't with the rest of the film anyway, so...

Q: Can you say... say anything about... I mean did you see Meaning of Life on your own?... the first time...

L21: No I saw it with a friend...

Q: What was the friend's, sort of reaction... I'm just also sort of... what were your impressions of other people's reactions...

L21: We both liked Monty Python when we hired it on video, and I think after watching the film we both felt disappointed, we expected more from the film; in the vein of Monty Python this seemed to have been a bit of a let-down, from what they'd done in the past...

Q: Yes, umm... yes, but in particular, how do you think other people, what are your perceptions of the way other people sort of react to the... sort of bodily violence...

L21: You see he was a bit like me, he revelled in horror films, so... if anything he was slightly more sadistic in his... watching material, so he's... if I remember, he's sort of revelling in the amount of violence being shown...

Q: Because what I'm after is the fact that some people will be more anxious about certain material; whether that anxiety makes them sort of such themselves off from it completely, and not want to have anything to do with it, or whether they'll, it'll sort of... they might actually find it funny because of that.

L21: I don't think for a majority of the real audience, particularly if they're not a Monty Python fan, 'cos a Monty Python, even if they're repulsed by imagery like that, in other films, will probably appreciate it, because they know what to expect from Monty Python material, but for a general, well for a majority of the audience, and for someone who doesn't appreciate Monty Python to a ~~such~~ an extent, I mean, they would actually have shut themselves off from that scene... on video they might not have continued with the material, possibly...

Q: ...so what... another question which I had jotted down, yes,

what sort of, what do you think makes a Monty Python fan?  
...or the sort of person who likes watching Monty Python-  
type films...

L21: It'd be type-casting myself as a certain person...

Q: Well, yes, what...

L21: 'cos whatever I say, in generalising as a Monty Python fan, I would have to be careful that, that...it's the opposite to me...I try...'cos I wouldn't class myself as a Monty Python fan, but what I would class as a typical Monty Python fan, I would see as being different to myself...if you're aware of what I'm trying to say...

Q: Yes...

L21: ...yes, the typical Monty Python fan...is...he would enjoy sort of alternative humour, which has been, which is a sort of label term...possibly rebellious against society...possibly someone who...who has restricted themselves, restricted their emotions, and can find outlets through the kind of humour that Monty Python depicts...

Q: What do you mean by 'restricted their emotions'?

L21: Umm...I know what I want to say but I can't say it! Someone who's a bit of a recluse, I would have thought, someone who can't share their emotions with groups of people, with people around them...someone who might feel slightly depressive but can find relief...(?) someone that feels depressive in society, and shows a zany and a more sort of less serious view to life...

Q: That's interesting...what...do you have...where does that idea come from? I mean...interesting idea...

L21: I don't know...something off the top of my head! It's something I wouldn't change...I have my idea that most people who like alternative humour would come under that sort of barrier...although there are other forms of sort of alternative humour, the more sort of sexual type of jokes...which aren't really that sort of significant in Monty Python films, although it did crop up quite a bit in here...they would probably take in more of the sort of the sort of crude vulgar type of person of society, the person who enjoys sort of sexual jokes...

Q: ...which you feel Monty Python, that isn't...

L21: ...that isn't such a major factor, no.

Q: What else, I think that's very interesting, what sort of, what about other forms of comedy, then things like situation comedy on television...do you watch sitcom?...much...

L21: Sometimes...Only Fools and Horses...Dear John...that's the same writing partnership...Alf Garnett, possibly...around those sort of lines...

Q: What are your reasons, when you watch, what sort of...

L21: Just, they seem to be generally more humorous than the average comedy programme...

Q: So I mean you select...

L21: Yes...a lot of... a lot of the comedy programmes...there's one called Duty Free, which I just absolutely detest...it just doesn't seem to be funny, it's more interesting in a narrative rather than humour...something like Only Fools and

Horses, there's a lot of one-line sort of gags, a lot of verbal jokes, there's also visual humour, and it's...a lot of the scenes you can see building up before they actually occur...and also, like Monty Python, the unexpected quite often happens. Dear John I suppose you could include under 'attack on society'.

Q: But in...but in general I mean you obviously see the function of...of sitcom in general...very general terms to be quite different from...say Monty Python...

L21: Yes, I would...and for the majority of sitcom, I wouldn't watch it...I don't find them that funny.

Q: and what, why would most people be watching them...or what types of people...

L21: ...people who've got nothing else to do (laughs)...people who just watch television...because I think the majority of sitcoms, people would not watch them on a regular basis, they wouldn't go out of their way to watch them, if they're watching television, and it's on, and it looks interesting, they would watch them...Only Fools and Horses, I know from the response it got from my friends and from round school, has more of a cult following, and I and also people at school actually went out of their way to watch virtually every episode...

Q: I was going to say that I've just been reading a book on...on television, and the family, and David Morley's done lots of interviews with families in London and that came across, virtually everyone was saying you know that if they watched sitcoms they watched that...there's a lot of comments about the fact that it's based in the East End and everything, and a lot of people say they recognize certain types of characters; and they...you know, that's one of the main pleasures of watching...

L21: ...that's the other thing about Only Fools and Horses, the characters, they're so sort of easily identifiable...the...there's a really sort of dull and stupid one, I can't remember his name, the tall one...

Q: ...I don't know, I don't watch it...

L21: ...and he really, he's just so sort of dense, he's so easy to sort of identify with...(people?) really get fed up with... just hasn't got the (brain?)...

Q: Whereas clearly Monty Python is in a completely different area...

L21: Yes...you can still identify with some of the imagery they're putting across...like the Saxon society...the Life of Brian, the way that they attack the whole, the whole concept of sort of the birth of Christ...I don't know if it's the right word saying 'identify' but...I can relate to the way that they're attacking...

Q: Yes... I think it's a different sort of identification...

L21: ...yes... it is, definitely...I mean, you definitely don't identify with the characters because in the majority of the films they don't bother to build up character...characters are secondary to the sort of comedy...

Q: Yes...let's have a look at what I've got written down...if there's anything important I've forgotten...Yes I mean something that you've already touched on, you actually said

that in the first parts of the film, something you didn't appreciate that much, the fact that the...the sort of sexual stuff was a bit as you said crude...I was going to ask, under what...do you think that sometimes 'smut' or, you know, without being necessarily in a joke format, could be funny...

L21: I don't get what you...

Q: Well just the fact of seeing somebody's bum or whatever, or somebody, or the fact that they're talking about...sex...

L21: It depends on the way that the material's being exploited; a pornographic film wouldn't be, I wouldn't see as funny... definitely wouldn't be funny! Possibly the more sort of, the films that have occurred in the last two or three years, the more sort of teenage type of...exploitation of skin, or however you want to call it...depending on how it's put across is funny but I still wouldn't see it because it's usually...OK you could say Monty Python's pathetic humour, but at least it has a reason behind it, or I see that there's a reason behind it; with those sort of teenage films, the only reasoning is to exploit male and female genitalia or whatever...

Q: Yes, OK that's the point, that's the point I'm making...in a way, I'm aiming at two levels, one is yourself, and what you perceive other people doing as well, that there does seem to be a point at which just showing genitals or just talking about se...talking dirty or whatever can be...can be funny...under some circumstances...

L21: Depends on the individual, though, I think...

Q: You don't find it works that way for you...

L21: No. There's...again, you could also say, it depends who you're actually viewing the material with, if you're viewing it in a group of, don't know, half a dozen male people, I mean possibly you can see the material different.

Q: That's right...I think that I mean...even a situation like this, the fact that there's just you and me watching it in this way is quite different; I mean if...in another session there might be half a dozen people interacting a bit more and so on, then you might get different sorts of response...

What impression do you get...just sort of...if you've got a particular sort of problem or strong feeling about something, would you say that it increases the chances of finding something funny or decreases them...I mean, if you feel strongly about the particular issue which is being...

L21: If you've...if you're sort of...experiencing a death in the family, certain things relating to death I'd think wouldn't be perceived as so funny...cos I've experienced...I've actually got a grandparent who's..not got long to live...at the moment, but I've also had one who's died recently, and there was that bit at the beginning of Monty Python, where they had the funeral procession; I didn't find that particularly funny; possibly in a more sort of relaxed way towards death that may have been perceived as more funny. But that's just generalising the idea...giving an example. I wouldn't say that I'm actually responding that way; I didn't actually respond that way at the beginning but I'm just citing an example of how someone may actually be in a position while viewing that material...

Q: Oh well yes, but there's an important distinction...I mean as

you say, you've given an example of how somebody might, but you've just said that you didn't find it particularly funny...

L21: No but I don't think that's for the reasons of what I'm experiencing at the moment...

Q: You don't think it's for those reasons...

L21: ...no...

Q: ...because that's really what I'm getting at...

L21: because I...I said, I've seen the film before, I knew what was coming, and also I'm slightly more hardened to the material, the more provocative material.

Q: Yes...because there are two sort of conflicting sets of research or...they don't necessarily conflict but they seem to anyway, one group saying that clearly those sorts of anxieties, if you like, can inhibit finding something amusing; on the other hand, if one has that anxiety, it can actually be a release...to get rid of that anxiety...

L21: yes...but in the past I don't think I've ever experienced that, I'm more sort of repulsed by the imagery...I feel it could be my insecurity, or...(?)...but I feel it's more attacking me, rather than attacking society or whatever, wanting to attack whatever it's presenting...

Q: Yes...I can see that...there's an example of...a sketch on one of the television programmes called the Undertaker sketch, I don't know if you saw that...

L21: ...I've heard of it...

Q: ...where, it was Terry Jones and Michael Pa...I can't, I can't remember who actually wrote the Undertaker sketch, but then, I think Terry Jones it was whose parents were very ill, or mother was very ill or something like that, and sort of felt God, we can't do this...but he actually changed his mind and said well...this is...that's not a good enough reason...but I mean that's from his point of view as one of the writers, you know...

Yes, ah yes...

L21: ...just thinking about, expanding on what you just said, if the writer sometimes, you know writing the material, could be a release for something that he's experienced, possibly...

Q: Yes and that extends...

L21: ...a sort of emotional release...coming to terms with reality and actually and making fun of something that they've been depressed by...

Q: Yes I'm sure that's right, and that's not only for comedy...it works for comedy, but probably in other ways for other types of writing as well...

How do you feel about things like sort of exaggeration?

L21: ...in Monty Python...

Q: ...in general...

L21: I don't mind, if anything, I think it usually enhances the joke, as long as it doesn't go completely over the top and kills the joke...as you saw in the 'Autumn Years' extract, you can't get more exaggerated than that, and I found that, because it was exaggerated it was funny...

Q: ...are there any other examples...

- L21: There's the exaggeration of participation in war...the bit where they're all in the trenches...that's a gross exaggeration... well, most of the film was a gross exaggeration...
- Q: Yes, that's right, in a sense you could say most of it is, but I mean, the thing that interests me in particular is the relation between exaggeration and understatement, because I mean they are...sort of two ends of the same, two, see what I mean exaggeration is 'too much'...
- L21: If you're understating something, surely the joke's not working.
- Q: Well, what I mean by it, I mean, I don't think so, because what I mean by understatement is something like...Eric Idle lying in bed, you know in the Zulu war, and having his leg bitten off, and then not reacting to it, you know treating it like...
- L21: I would have said that was exaggeration...
- Q: Yes, that's what I'm getting at, I mean I call that understatement, but I can see that it's...
- L21: I'd have said that it's exaggeration of the position of the officers and the sort of perks that they receive...well, actually relating to him not reacting to the leg was just... possibly understating but I would have seen it as exaggeration.
- Q: Yes...I saw it as a combination of the two, that it's an understatement of..reaction, you know, of sort of well, leg bitten off and 'Oh, it's just a scratch', and then saying that it's a mosquito, I mean it seems to be a nice play on sort of understatement and exaggeration together...
- Right I mean I've gone through...I think I've covered most of the areas I thought I wanted to get in...anything else you can think of? Yes I mean you said that you liked in Monty Python the sort of fact, the way things can go from one thing to another very easily, and you don't know what's coming next...
- L21: That destroys the conventional narrative, which usually overkills the joke because in a film you're just, you've got the, you're plodding through the plot and are waiting for jokes to sort of appear every now and then...at least in the Monty Python you can stop something straight away and start again with a complete new idea without sort of complaining that you've destroyed the narrative.
- Q: That's right, yes...but as you say that works more for the television stuff than for, to some extent, I think more for Life of Brian and Holy Grail, they tend to have bits and pieces woven into them...
- L21: ...(?)...one of the really funny bits was in Life of Brian, he jumps off the building and lands in a spaceship, that is completely unexpected, and it allows for them to creep in a couple of jokes about being caught in a spaceship in the middle of an intergalactic war or something...
- Q: ...although to some extent I saw that as an excuse as well to put in a bit of animation...not an excuse, but it's a, it's a place to put some animation. Just as in this film you've got a bit of animation in the...
- L21: ...fish...
- Q: ...fish, and also the song, it's not exactly animation, but there's, sort of this graphics...Have you seen, have you

heard, this is going back to something else, different, have you heard the Derek and Clive tapes?

L21: Umm...on and off, I <sup>haven't</sup> ~~only~~ actually sat down...

Q: ...you've heard some...

L21: Yes...

Q: What...how do you respond to it?

L21: I think they're funny, but not as funny as Monty Python... there's a...may be stretching a bit, there's, they're the sketches with the two tramps...is there two tramps, or

Q: yyes...well,

L21: they...they wear long coats and the flat caps...and they usually sit in a pub...

Q: Yes but hang on...yes, but wait a minute, no...that's the Dud...originally there were the Dud and Pete sketches on Not Only But Also, and then Peter Cook and Dudley Moore made some sound, you know just audio tapes, Derek and Clive...

L21: Yes, I've heard bits of them but I wouldn't sort of...quote stuff from it...not too freely anyway...

Q: You know they are...

L21: ...they are funny...

Q: ...particularly gross extension of the Dud and Pete stuff, and I actually did toy with the idea of...of using that, to some extent, this kind of...to go into this idea of 'smut' as well, and just using some of the...really goes over the top with...with obscenity and...things which might offend people and how far can one go and still find something funny. Oh yes, that's something else...there is something I'd forgotten...there's a few jokes in...or a few, few moments in Meaning of Life which could be sort of offensive...

L21: Everything that's comic could be perceived as offensive...

Q: Yes all right...I'll rephrase that...particular moments which could be offensive to women or to, there are a couple of sort of potentially...they flirt with racism a couple of times, not so much in this, but in, you know in Life of Brian there's the stuff about...

L21: (?)

Q: Yes, but I mean the racism in particular, <sup>in</sup> Life of Brian is there's a Palestinian liberation organization...

L21: They attack Jewish people...as well...which they did in that as well...

Q: ...in the next sketch...there's a...well you see, this is the point, 'attack'...

L21: Yes...well I wouldn't say attack, I wouldn't perceive it as an attack...whereas...someone who's really...really strict Jewish would probably perceive it as an attack...this is attacking their morals and their actual way of life...they would see themselves being placed in the position as a sort of a symbol or metaphor, the actual Jewish person being presented, and actually see themselves being attacked rather than the actual image ~~on~~ the screen being attacked...if 'attack's the right word!

Q: But do you...yes, I realize that's one of the things, yes...

\* cf note pg.36 above



...but would you say that's...a sort of inverted commas 'correct' position to take, or would you say that they were missing the point or whatever...

L21: Depends on the individual...for myself I don't really care what actually gets shown on the screen...it's only a film... and I don't think you should really take material that seriously...

Q: ...but to some extent I mean one could say that most of... most of us! ..shouldn't say most of us, but a lot of us are in a position where we're not very likely to be in a position to be attacked... 'cos I think there are a few moments in Meaning of Life where I think women can feel quite...in a sense it'll be interesting to talk to some women respondents about that...I mean the animation bit, when they're out walking in the stars...

L21: you've got the bit in the hospital...the beginning...a couple of women (might feel) disturbed by the...the way that she's just taken for granted and not given any...special attention..

Q: Yes...in a sense I mean, I'd distinguish between those different things, I mean in that scene, in that sequence, I mean that's part, a major part of the point of that sketch, is the fact that yes, I mean they are making fun of the fact that the woman in that situation is neglected and so on; but I mean the...there isn't any such point in for instance the graphics where you've got the female form being fertilized and then a sort of shot towards the vagina...

L21: ..but that...but that, anyone who felt disturbed by that image, I would have thought would have been more towards the sort of feminist area...

Q: Right, yes...

L21: that they're actually...sort of tread carefully here! they're actually being used rather, not as a person but more for, to sort of give birth...

Q: Yes, I think that's right, and another moment is when the, there's a couple of bits towards the end that we didn't see, oh yes the cleaning woman being vomited all over...

L21: If you had a film which say had a male cleaner...I wouldn't I wouldn't sort of pinpoint on the vomiting bit, 'cos I don't think he's attacking women, he's not vomiting on her because she's a woman, I wouldn't say that, but in a film which attacks social convention, you have to show things, I don't think you have to, but to enhance the comedy, you have to show things which people actually are aware of, people perceive as things around them in society...the stereotyped roles; if it was a man being vomited on, in a cleaner's clothes, it might not be so funny, I'm not saying it's funny because it's a woman, it might not be so funny because you're not able to see it as an actual social thing, it's a bit...if you understand what I'm trying to say; if say like it was a 50:50 place in society, where there was 50% male cleaners, 50% female cleaners, then you could actually decide whether you wanted a male or a female cleaner, but as it currently stands, the problem with society is that there's a significant majority of female cleaners, so I think you have to depict a female cleaner.

Q: Yes, I take that point, but still I think, some people would still...would say that the mes...the sort of...I don't like

the word 'message' but yes the kind of messages that are being, or the meanings that are in that kind of image, are all to do with a woman on her knees and being vomited on, I mean if one puts it that way, it's not a terribly...

L21: She wouldn't bend over...she would have to go on her knees to clean it up...a practical way of doing her job.

Q: Yes, yes. I think there's a separation between, I mean you're looking at it in terms of, yes there is a little narrative going on there, and what's sort of realistic within, in terms of...that...

L21: ...but you say that she gets vomited on...doesn't the waiter get vomited on? and also you have a waiter who brings a bucket; if you wanted to expand your theory surely that would have been a woman who would have brought the bucket in, and would have got vomited on.

Q: Well I don't have any particular theory but...I think...

L21: I agree with you that there is a...there is a...an inequality between male and female in society but I don't think...it depends on what you think but I don't think it's actually explored or exploited in a film such as a Monty Python film.

Q: No, yes I'll agree with that, because the film isn't...

L21: ...it attacks everything, it doesn't actually say, right, we're going to attack women in this film.

Q: But I think there's a difference between what a film sets out to do and what the images end up doing with particular viewers.

L21: But isn't that depending on how sort of pro-feminist you are or...

Q: It'll have a lot to do with that, but not only, because there'll be...we're getting off, possibly drifting off a little bit now, but I mean...a lot of people watching the film, men or women, with that image, if one finds it funny for whatever reason, probably the reason is to do with the grotesqueness, Greosote vomiting all over the place, I mean that's the main thing that one's likely to find funny, rather than the fact that there's this cleaning-woman... the fact that one just takes that as being you know there, and it's funny, reinforces...

L21: Well I didn't, I didn't actually perceive any attack on a female, or I didn't also perceive she was on her knees, I just saw that she was on her knees cleaning; I didn't see she was on her knees, she was being attacked, vomited on; if you want to...in comparison, possibly something like Mildred Pierce, at the end of that, you have those two ladies there...that is an explicit, it's made obvious that they're attacking the female role in society...

Q: Well I think that's...

L21: ...it's not put there just to show two women cleaning the floor...it's actually put there to sort of show that the women are trodden down...to things like that, which, it's not being shown in the Monty Python film...

Q: That's very true, yes it doesn't have the same role, the image doesn't have the same function at all, that's right... which is not to say, though, that the...which is not to say that it has no function! It's still there as an image, and

...yes one can then argue about how valid it is to pick it up, and sort of say well that image is a negative one, shouldn't be there...and the fact that it's the cleaning-woman who is then also made to say, she's the one who says 'at least I didn't work for Jews'...

L21: I didn't hear that...

Q: Not in the bit we saw, but afterwards, when they're sitting in the...in the resaurant, in the devastated restaurant, mopping up...

L21: I missed it...

Q: In that case let's just listen to that...

L21: ...the bucket...possibly it's attacking females there...

Q: ...yes, more so than perhaps the other one...the putting together of

L21: ...but what I was thinking as I was seeing that is...as it's.. if it would have been an actual female playing that role, it would have been more of an attack, more explicit; as it's a man playing a woman, you see it more as comedy rather than attacking a certain part of society...although it is attacking a certain part of society...

Q: ...so it complicates the issue, certainly...

L21: If they would have had an old cleaner then you would have felt sympathy possibly for what she was saying...also would have felt sympathy or shock at a bucket being put over her head, but as it's somebody obviously in drag, someone putting on a voice,...

#### TAPE 3: H11.H13

Q: ...an hour or so just chatting about the film, about comedy, Monty Python, anything like that...I mean I've got a few particular points I usually raise, that I want to cover with everybody, but I mean...just kick off in a way with sort of responses...what...(H13) what did you...

H13: I was comparing it to Life of Brian which I found very very funny, and I think...I think they succeeded with Life of Brian because they had, they were developing one thing, whereas here there's...they've got so many little slots, some work quite well, some I found less than moderately funny...the only one I found extremely funny was the man exploding, you know, I thought that was great...and some, I've been quite generous when I've put down, like the first one I didn't find all that funny, but I've put down a '3' you see...I wonder if they made them in sequence, as they're shown, or, I became interested, to say now, did they make the man exploding first, and then they sort of burned themselves out!...

Q: ...that I don't know but...don't know what order they were actually made in...so you'd say that the exploding Mr Creosote was the one that was certainly the funniest...

H13: Yes...yes, yes I'm sure if you took a...went out on the street, every body would say...(laughter)

H11: I certainly thought that was the funniest...but I'm that way, I've certainly watched it with other people and they've found it absolutely revolting, in fact they've been turned off by the whole, the whole thing...the whole programme (?)...

I don't think it's as good as some of their earlier pieces... but that is certainly the high-spot of it; I find it's quite clever, rather than amusing...

H13: ...the way they lead from one to the other is...that they've thought about quite a lot...

H11: ...I mean some of the bits like in Holy Grail and Life of Brian would be side-busting, you know...(?)...but this one, I think it's clever the way it's done, it's put together nicely, but it's not actually funny in many places...

H13: Who directed Life of Brian? I've noticed Terry Jones had directed that one...

Q: Umm...Life of Brian...I think it was Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, wasn't it...

H13: Yes I thought it was perhaps a new venture for him, 'cos he what's he done recently...

Q: who?

H13: Terry Jones has done something else recently...

Q: Terry Jones directing...I'm not sure...oh of course yes I mean he's done this what'sit, Personal Function, Private Function, not Private, not Private Fun...what is it, the one about...no, yes that was somebody else, but I'm thinking about...Personal Services...

H13: Oh that's right yes, yes...you see that one about that nice little song in the, in the sort of the Oliver vein about the sperm and God being irate, you see, I mean you've got, you've got some, you've got a good idea there...

Q: Yes...but for me that raises, both of you have raised an important question that, I mean, did you have problems filling in the...this, this thing here?

H13: No...

H11: No, I found that the easiest to fill in...

Q: Yes...cos I mean what a few...a point a few people have raised is that...I mean, the question is basically, a range of funniness, how funny it is; now I mean you've both sort of indicated that it's cleverly done, there's a, it's a great idea and there's all sorts of things going on, so that there are presumably other things that one appreciates or likes...

H13: Oh yes, I think it's a shame just to judge it you know on its, on its 'laugh-factor'...

Q: ...but what...in other words, what other sorts of pleasure are there going on there apart from, apart from funniness?

H13: There's... there's some quite nice visual...I wouldn't go so far as to say visual delights, but...it's not an unattractive film...I mean the very fact that you're jumping about from one thing to another keeps you, keeps you attentive and interested all the time...I just think it's a shame that they they didn't get hold of some of the things and take them a step further...

H11: I was, when I was answering, sorry...jump in...was trying to compare it to my feelings when I first saw it, because I think that some of them certainly do sour when you've seen them a couple of times...

Q: which ones...which parts in particular...

H11: The Crimson Permanent Assurance I thought was...was brilliant, I mean the whole idea is very good, I mean the idea of having all the awning and turning it into a sail and sort of brealing bits off and using them as... and the filing-cabinets as cannons I thought was superb...but yes, once you've seen it, I've seen it a couple of, well three or four times, you think well oh well yes, that's fine...and there's nothing, there's no depth to it...a lot of their programmes you can see, and every time you look at it, you see something different...and the only thing that I compare with that is the Mr Creosote sequence, 'cos every time I look at that, there's some little other bit that you can see, that's... very cleverly put together...Miracle of Birth and Growth and Learning, I think it tends to be rather sexual, overtly sexual and I think that puts a lot of people off; it doesn't bother me because I just think it's...it's a laugh...

Q: Yes, well can we...stick with that for a moment, and sort of compare, I mean there are two sections I've sort of chosen deliberately like that, 'cos one is clearly sexual, overtly sexual...and there are, well there are a few other bits in the next sections which are more violent...I mean you've got the 'Fighting Each Other' part bits, and the leg having been chopped off, and then you've got the Live Organ Transplants, you've got a lot of sort of visual violence there and sort of bodies being hacked up; I mean which of those, how do you compare those two?

H11: Well I found the live organ transplant...probably...I found it pretty bad when I first saw it, I don't like a lot of blood spilling about...right over the top, wasn't it... (laughter)...

Q: Yes...but do you remember...do you remember your actual physical response when you were watching it first time...

H11: I didn't feel too bright over it...but I still thought it was funny...but certainly the bits when they...the conception was good and the sequence where they're actually sort of saying to him, you know, fish out the donor's...donor's card out of his pocket...I thought was very good, but the next sequence, where they're actually hacking it up, I thought was a bit...I didn't find that too pleasant...

H13: I think the fact that they, it goes over the top, somehow makes it less, less horrific...

H11: Oh yes,...

H13: It's like...there's The Exorcist which a potentially very frightening film, but they just take it too far and it becomes laughable...but had they stopped at a certain point you know, it would have been incredibly frightening...

Q: I was really frightened actually...

H13: ...but having their heads spinning round and thinks like that and...you know it becomes ridiculous, and you...you don't relate to it any more...

Q: I see what you mean...

H13: ...and you do with that...I mean this, I mean he must have lost about three times his normal amount of blood and so forth...

W Q: But I've never, I have observed, I think it was true for all

of you\*...and lots of other people as well, that however sort of horrible they say it is, they still laugh...it seems that that's...but is that, that's a different sort of laughter, isn't it...

H13: Mm, probably...though I didn't laugh all that much, I don't think, in that one. In that one where he's had his leg bitten off, because that again wasn't side-splittingly funny you start to say, now... I wish they'd find his leg, where is it...I want to see what's happened to his leg (laughter)... whereas if you'd put a...huge jokes in there, you wouldn't give a sod about the leg, would you...

Q: Let's go back to...any other pleasures, apart from, you mentioned visual pleasures...

H13: I mean you've got this very...they seem to have...not put much of old Gilliam's animations in...but and done things like as you were saying this pirate-ship-cum-office building, and I suppose quite an original way of...of using things... taking the fans off the...so you could...I mean you go through thinking yes yes that's very very clever, you know, that's quite ingenious and so forth...

Q: Yes...yes...that's what you're enjoying...

H13: Yes, yes...

Q: I mean I think another important thing, is it not, is performance, to some extent...I don't know, did you see the I don't remember seeing, I don't know, I've glanced through your questionnaire but I don't remember, did you see the original series? or have you seen it?

H11: I've...I've, yes, we're talking sort of early seventies, I can vaguely remember quite a bit of it, and certainly now they're rerunning the series a lot of it sort of comes to mind, when I see it, but I can't say I remember it very clearly...

Q: So seeing, in Meaning of Life, seeing seeing the performances of the, well of the Monty Python team, does that have any particular pleasures?

H11: Yes, because I think actually just seeing them sort of brings on a bit of a laugh, because you're almost anticipating before...

H13: ...and so you can be disappointed when when you know something's going to happen, or you want something to happen, and sometimes it doesn't; now whether they've done this, they're doing this on purpose, because they're fifteen years on or whatever...people'll be expecting something to happen here...but even though you know something's going to happen to that fat man, you know...every time he pukes into the bucket, you still laugh, although...it's very very strange why you do, you know...(laughter)...

Q: ...which is, yes...

H13: (laughter)...'cos you know it's going to happen...

H11: I find particularly with ones of theirs I've seen before, I tend to lau...as soon as I see what's coming, I tend to laugh, and then I sort of remain fairly quiescent throughout the performance, and then I have a bit of a titter at the end again...but...I know what's coming with a lot of things... it is anticipation, I think. it's...they're good actors,

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\* These two respondents watched the film together with H12.

basically, and whatever they do, they even sort of, any of the sketches that fall, fell flat, relatively speaking, I think the acting in it, and the performance, is still<sup>very</sup> good...

H13: Eric Idle is the...the sketch about the Grim Reaper, as the hostess, was excellent...

Q: Yes, yes...in fact... that can lead us on to something else, that, I mean the fact that they play women as well...

H13: But I mean...Graham Chapman and Terry Jones play pretty awful women...(imitates voice)(laughter)...I don't...but thinking back, looking at the tape of the Monty Python that's on the end of...at the weekend...and there's, there's two classic things there, one's the sheep in the tree, roosting, and the other one's the son in the smart suit, who's a coal-miner, or he's just got a job down the mine and he's going home to these parents who are playwrights, (imitates voices) and...they're very...slight ideas, aren't they really, I mean...

Q: Yes, so...how does, how does the writing, the script and the writing in Meaning of Life compare with...

H13: I don't think too much about the writing of them but I imagine they're conceived as, or by those chaps sitting round a table and...saying you know this is, wouldn't it be good or funny if we did this...

Q: It's... a tough question really but I mean it does strike me that I mean, with something like the coal-miner and playwright sketch, as you say it's a slight idea but it actually works very well, whereas in Meaning of Life you seem to be saying something opposite: it's not....idea...

H13: But it's such, it's...it's a very good idea, it's such a good idea that, you know the very fact that...you know the very fact that you've got this role, not role-reversal but.. I don't know how you'd describe it, I mean it just, ~~I mean~~ it's not contrived in any way, is it, it's a natural really for...something funny to come out of...

H13: I think with their earlier performances what they seemed to do is take something that was fairly normal in life and put an edge on it, a twist on it...like the sort of, the reversal between, the sort of the son and the playwright parents, sort of thing...there's all sorts of things like that, I mean the one on at the weekend...the 'Attila the Hun show'...brilliant skit on these American sort of...shows...I think they just take things from life, put a twist on them, and it's very funny, because you can almost see that sort of thing happening...

H13: ...oh yes, and there's, and there's some quite accurate bits of observation, like there's John Cleese, mounting his wife, you know, and it, you know, anything that's in a classroom is not interesting whatever it is, you know you turn off! (laughter)...anything that...

Q: would you...would you describe that as satire?

H13: Yes, I think you could do..I mean...that little tiny bit?... or the whole film?

Q: No, that...that sort of thing where you take an idea, you either turn it upside down or you exaggerate it, just to show how ridiculous things are, effectively...the childbirth as well, I mean...

H11: Yes...

Q: ...the mechani...the over technologisation of childbirth and the callousness and coldness...

H11: ...that's right, they're almost production-line techniques...

Q: 'cos I'm not sure whether...to call it satire or not...

H13: It's...it's closer to satire than perhaps, or the closest to satire they've been...

Q: Yes, maybe...a lot of the, compared with Holy Grail...

H13: I haven't seen that, I've only seen Life of Brian and...and that!(laughter)...and a few Monty Python shows on the television...

H11: ...I think in general what strikes me, is they've gone further away from what they used to be good at, and they've now gone all out it appears to shock a large member of the, a large number of the audience...I mean...if you stick with their films, all right ignoring their first one, which was basically a composition of all...sections of their television, it was called And Now For Something Completely Different wasn't it,

H13: Ah, I might have seen that...

H11: yes it was all sorts of bits and pieces from the television programmes...you take the sort of...through from Holy Grail Life OF Brian, Meaning of Life, they've gone for being more outrageous, if you like, throughout...I mean Life of Brkham I mean caused a great stir, you know...certainly with the sort of religious side of...the population, they saw it as you know, being completely...but it was very clever; but I think Holy Grail was very amusing, and not offensive to anyone, I don't think anyone found that offensive...and it was very funny indeed, I think that was probably their funniest film...

Q: Well I mean talking about, I mean...offense, leads on to the question of whether, I mean if something is close to you, and you're actually sort of concerned with...someone having died, or having an ill relative, or being into religion...then, you know is it, are you less likely or more likely to find something funny, because I mean what's...from what you're just saying obviously there are groups, religious groups and so on, who just felt the thing was blasphemous and so on, and clearly couldn't find that sort of thing funny, but...there is also another argument, that it can help to...to release some sort of tension..if there is humour about something which is quite close to you, it might actually in some ways be easier, I don't know, do you think it might..thinking about sort of, you know, the Death...if one has someone who's died, or...

H11: I think it's important, how close the events are together... (?)...I think having it, you know, on top of you know literally within days is...just...not be on...but certainly since the sort of, the immediate pain was over, you know whether it was a death or whatever, I think yes, it could do that, it would take the sort of tightness out of the situation...

H13: I think...I mean, if you, if you had suffered a bereavement or whatever, or...you had a friend who was pregnant or...I think you'd...and you said, we'll go to the cinema, I think



you'd...would you choose to see a Monty Python film? You would...

Q: You may not think of it, I mean OK...

H13: No...because they've been going so long now, you know that they're going to...they're going to try and surprise you...so you'd say to yourself, now do I want surprising? the state of mind I'm in...

Q: I think you're obviously, you're obviously right...

H13: ...and you, if you did go, and somebody had just died, you know you'd go because you did want the sort of surprises or shocks or whatever you anticipated...

Q: Yes, but I'm thinking more in terms of somebody who just wanders in without knowing what it is, or you know you drag somebody along, thinking oh, you know...and they're in a...reasonable mood and everything, I'll take them along to see this...and you'd actually forgotten that...a couple of weeks ago...liver transplant problem, or...yes, but...it's a slightly fatuous question because you're right, if it's something very close, which had just happened and so on...

H13: ...but I know when my father died, and I was in Beverley watching something, this wasn't a funny thing about death, but there was a hell of a lot of programmes, seemed to have somebody dropping down in them dead, and funerals and so forth, and my mum was saying 'turn it (off) or turn it over' you see...I was getting into that or something...so...I wasn't being troubled by it at all...

Q: ...she was...

H13: ...and she was.

H11: I think we're almost coming back to the point where it's so over the top...can you take it seriously? but I think some people are going to be obviously more sensitive to it than I was...I think those that are sort of, if you like into that sort of humour, will...will be less affected by it, they will probably find it amusing...and those that aren't particularly tuned in to that sort of humour will probably find it offensive all the time, and just worse when it's...

H13: But I mean I think they've always, haven't they, since the 70's, tried to shock, haven't they, or surprise, whichever...I suppose it's inevitable that they become, that organs are ripped out and people explode because otherwise, you know, it is, isn't it, it's...it's a progression of ideas, you've got to, otherwise people, people are no longer going to be surprised or shocked...so the thing is you ask, what do they do in their next film? (laughter)...

Q: There's some doubt about whether they will make another...Umm...yes, so...is it possible to laugh at, I mean we've sort of touched on why one laughs perhaps, there's a kind of laughter of shock or something that...you know the vomit...why do we laugh at that...can we also laugh (H13 laughing) do you think it's possible to laugh at smut on its own?...

H13: What do you mean on its own, do you mean...

Q: Just...just the mention of 'penis'...

H13: No, no, it's got to, I mean like Eric Idle and his Noel Coward...(laughter)...it's just...because you know that Noel Coward would never sing about things like that, that it makes it funny...

H11: ...but it's just like a Noel Coward song, isn't it...

H13: (laughter)...Yes I know...chap saying, 'what a dreadfully witty song!'....(laughter)...which also suggests that these people never listen to the words anyway! (laughter)...some ...going (nonsense sounds), everybody thought it was wonderful; so again, you've got a little bit of observation there as well, haven't you...

Q: Yes...I mean I'm not sure...I take your point but I'm not sure if people always actually go through that thought process before...before deciding to laugh, before deciding it's funny...

H13: Oh no they don't, it's...

Q: ...in that, in that particular, in that particular instance...

H13: ...but you do, you've got these two incongruous things, Noel Coward's voice and a song about dicks!...(laughter)...

Q: ...right...but what about the other, another sequence, which is in the school, the classroom, which is about sex; now why does that, I think, I mean I think that works quite well... (H13 laughing)...partly...OK I mean what's funny about that?

H13: (amid helpless laughter)...(?)...'There he is now, you'll notice, chaps, that the penis is hard' 'what's that you've got there!' 'it's an ocarina, sir' 'bring it here!'...it's just again, this...incongruousness...(laughter)

Q: It is incongruous, but I mean are there not moments, isn't that helped, isn't that sketch helped by the fact that it's about sex?

H13: I don't think...I suppose so, because that's...I mean they've taken the ultimate, which you'd think, you know, boys would be interested in, but in a classroom situation, you know, you turn off...whatever it is...so...

H11: I mean that...sort of almost opens up the sketch, talking about vaginal juices, and I think there's a shock impact in that...certainly what appears to be the headmaster, coming in and sort of comin in and leading straight off into things like that...

Q: That's part...that's partly what I'm getting at, is that... just the, OK there's the shock...shock impact of...straight sex, being just talked about, mentioned, and similarly... mind you, I mean I don't know, what do you think of this, I've always been surprised over all the times I've shown this video, I've never actually heard anybody laugh at the moment when the kids in the Sperm Song, say like... 'couldn't mummy have worn some sort of pessary'...or 'couldn't you have your balls cut off?'. Those two particular lines never seem to get a laugh...which always surprises me a bit... there's something wrong with me!...but...

H13: Perhaps it should have been said by a younger kid, I don't know...I think it's that, I think the timing's wrong, the delivery's, somehow is cocked up, I suppose it could be funny, yes...I think that's a technical point, though, that, about that not getting a laugh, but it probably could be funny, yes...

Q: Because I mean that's another instance of more or less, I mean what, why would that be found funny,...partly because of the kid...

H13: I mean at that stage there they've got, you know when those

kids leap out they're all sort of stage...(Italia Conti) kids aren't they you know, they should be, they should be very much in character in that sketch, you know they should be talking Yorkshire...so somehow it starts to crumble, but it's a very good idea...

H11: I think to get that sort of impact it's...you've got to lead off that sort of sketch with...you know figure it so that that child is saying while (?)...if you like...then it might have the impact, but you've, you've been talking about it I mean they've gone through a whole sequence where they've been talking about sort of...sex, not perhaps directly so much, but you know in a roundabout way, and I think people tend to settle, I settle into a, you know, a rut, and I say well this is about (?) you know, and then I'm looking really for something to shake me out of it...

Q: ...or a new angle...

H11: yes...

H13: When they go across the road to the protestants' house, and Eric Idle again is very good as this, this this sort of (?) woman...

H11: Yes...that's a very good sequence, that...

H13: But, and then they, then they really spoil the joke by, you know, by...the one about...you know they've got...every, talking about you know they've got hundreds of kids, every time you have sexual intercourse you (?)...and all they need to say you know is 'we've got two', I mean they, you could leave it there, you don't have to go, 'and we've had sexual intercourse twice!'...

H11: ...that's right...

H13: ...(?). ...It's spout!

Q: But to some extent that could be a question of audience as well...

H13: But I mean...you know I mean if I was, you try to pull the audience, don't you, not...sink to their level or whatever or...

Q: Umm...another question; is it possible to laugh, I mean in this film or anywhere else, I mean do you find yourselves laughing at things that you don't approve of?...things that you sort of think oh...I don't like that...I really don't approve of that...

H13: Yes, yes I think I can, yes...

H11: ...trying to think of something that I don't really approve of...

H13: What, do you mean in the film, are you talking specifically about that film, or anything one doesn't approve of?

Q: Well either, but we can start off perhaps more generally...

H13: I think you can make anything...you see, you see if you take something like child abuse, it would, it would depend, it would completely depend on how you decided to present that, would it not?

Q: Yes...to some extent we're back with the earlier question about you know religious groups and so on, but I mean individually, personally...

H13: I mean there's the bit, this is going back to the sperm, and

the irate god, I'm expecting this, you see to be a real, to really lay into the Catholics, you see, but he lets them off very gently...shame...(you're not a catholic, are you?)

H11: (no)...

H13: ...however, going back, what, things, things you don't approve of...

Q: ...what I'm think of...specifically sort of sexist and racist jokes, which I would not want to laugh at...

H13: ...but you can, you know you can highlight, you can highlight sexism and racism and make people aware of it perhaps...you know...

Q: No...no what I'm thinking of is...is situations where I hear a sexist or racist joke and I laugh despite myself...

H13: I see...

Q: It's actually sort of saying you know I object to that, you know it's really something I don't like, but despite myself I find it funny...can you think of any instances or...

H13: I think...sexist jokes, you know, the butt of that joke can really be anybody, can't it...and you can change them about to suit...I mean if you take something simple like 'What's got an IQ of 144?' it could either be a gross of Irishmen...you know you can put anybody at the end of it, can't you...you could put a gross of pupils from (school), a group of people who live in Westview Rise, or whatever, you know...it doesn't have to be any particular category...

Q: Well...the success of the joke does depend on the recognizability of that group...

H13: Yes, but you'd use...if you were talking to an Irishman you'd probably throw Irishmen in at the end, if you were talking to a Nigerian you might put that in, you know, hoping that he would be amused or whatever...(bemused laughter from Q and H11)...but it's not dependent on any one particular racial group, to make it funny...I think when a joke, when it's tied down very much to a particular group that's when it can become dangerous...but if you can substitute any group you like in there,...obviously then the joke doesn't depend on that...particular section of people.

Q: Yes...quite often I find myself, what I'm laughing at is the cleverness of the joke...but then I think, oh yes, but I do object to this, and so I shouldn't be laughing...and I mean the reason I, I think there are, can you think of some things in Meaning of Life which are a bit in that category...there are a few moments I think...

H11: ...the part at the end of the Creosote scene, where the cleaning-lady's talking about you know where she's been and what she's read, and sort of ends up 'at least I don't work for Jews'(laughter from H13)...but then that's totally defused because the bloke's sort of shocked and horrified, tips a bucket up over her, so that's...

Q: Yes, but does that make it completely OK?

H11: I think so, yes...

H13: ...it shows that they're not approving...

H11: ...someone doesn't approve of it, you know, they've made the joke, and they've sort of made the sort of rhyme at the end and they've made the impact, but there's someone in there

who you can actually sort of label if you like as establishment the sort of, you know, head waiter, in a posh restaurant, and he's sort of shown that he's offended by...

H Q: Mm yes... what do we actually laugh at, I mean... I suppose you could say we're laughing at the discomfiture of the... this woman...

H13: I think again you don't expect, you don't expect that to be said at that point... it comes out very very suddenly and very very surprisingly...

H Q: ...the first time you hear it, and after that you listen for the rhyme, yes... I mean... some people have pointed, well one or two people have pointed out that, I mean this goes back to the fact that they play women as well, the fact that it's a cleaning-woman who's vomited all over (H13 laughter) and then gets the bowl of vomit over her as well... I mean which...

H11: Well the Maitre D gets the, gets the vomit all down his leg, doesn't, and he stands with a bucket...

H13: ...I just wondered... the people who watch Monty Python, whether they are... whether they do get involved in the character they're playing, or whether they just say, you know, that's Terry Jones, that's Michael Palin, that's John Cleese, regardless... so it doesn't really matter that it's a cleaning lady...

Q: Well... I don't think... I don't think it's necessary to be involved in the character for it to have, maybe, possibly some sort of reinforcing effect about abuse of women or something like that... I mean it doesn't have to be a conscious sort of...

H13: But I mean the fact... you see we were talking just a bit ago about how 'at least I don't work for a Jew' and the man expresses displeasure... (laughter)... so I mean what they're doing, what the Python team are doing there, they're saying 'let's give it our veto', 'we disapprove of such statements'; now... do they have to do this all the time; if you raise an issue in a film, like abuse of women, or anything sexist, do you have to say 'I disagree with that, I disagree with that'; why don't you... you can show an example of this, can't you, I mean why does somebody have to say 'Oh that's bad isn't it'?

Q: Yes I... suppose it's an awkward problem...

H13: I mean it's, again it's like, it's like that laboured joke, you, sort of you're in a way insulting somewhat the intelligent of your audience... I mean 'cos it certainly doesn't encourage any things which... which most right-thinking people would be against, does it... I mean it doesn't encourage abuse of women or... (laughter)...

Q: Oh it doesn't... in any very blatant way...

H13: (laughter)... not wanting to work for Jews...

Q: ...because there's one particular, there is one particular point, I think, where I'm a bit uncomfortable; what's going on in that point where... near the end...

H11: ...where he's being chased...

Q: ...where he's being chased.

H11: That concerns me a bit... and he's, what is he accused of,

Q: Making gratuitous sexist jokes in a moving picture!

H13: (prolonged laughter)

Q: ...and he gets...killed for it, executed for it, great, but the film's still doing it...

H13: Again I think, you know, they're covering themselves... (laughter)...

Q: ...yes...but I don't think it works...

H11: I think probably as far as your point's concerned with racism or sexism I found that possibly the more uncomfortable part, because I couldn't actually see what the point of that was... I found that a bit disconcerting...

Q: Unless, I mean the only point seemed to be to have a bit in there with topless women running around, I mean it's difficult to see any other point...

H13: Yes...but I think it's as well for it to have something like that so you do go away, rather than just reliving these wonderful little memories of men exploding and so forth... and the other funny thing with the child, that's just born, (sound effect)...

H11: 'frighten it'

H13: ...it's to go away saying you know, what was that all about?

H11: I think the whole film throws up lots of questions and never satisfactorily answers them, I mean the title of the film, you're expecting to get some result at the end and what you get is a sort of...

Q: ...well you do get something at the end, don't you...

H13: You were saying that there was a book in which there were... there were parts that weren't in the film; as...I mean they go through, where are we, Miracle of Birth, Fighting Each Other, there's no, there's nothing about any relationships, are there, or forging relationships...marriage, if you like, or whatever, but there's nothing really, there's no section for that, is there...

Q: Well unless...you know in the script, or in the book, it's written, there's a section on Martin Luther arriving at a Jewish family's house, and sort of ogling the daughters... (H13 laughter) I mean that's just not there; which I would have loved to see, 'cos it's...it's really sort of about, again it's about sex and going to the toilet...since Martin Luther conceived his...how many articles did he write, well he nailed his articles to the door...(?)...he actually did it when he was sitting on the toilet...apparently...

H11: That was never in the film?... 'cos I thought, I remember, when I first saw it...

Q: Ah, now...

H11: ...a sequence being in it, but I've had the video since and it's not been in it...

Q: OK, tell me, I mean tell me about that because...

H11: I can't remember it very well because I only saw it on the very first time I did see it...

Q: ...because I've only, you know I didn't see it when it first came out, I've only ever seen videos and I've never seen that...and nobody's ever mentioned that...but I mean it could be that there was, there were prints which, and it was later put out in...

H13: When...Life of Brian wasn't shown in Watford, Hemel,  
Q: ...initially..  
H13: ...it was shown in St.Albans, wasn't it...  
Q: ...yes...that's right...  
H13: no I was just wondering if, I mean do authorities take out sections of films...(?)  
H11: No I wouldn't of thought they would have touched the film, would they, unless it was something they could chop off on the end of a reel or something...  
Q: ...no I wouldn't have thought so...but yes, I mean, it's a section in which...yes, Martin Luther, there's a whole little thing about...I think it's Hymie coming back from the market having done the shopping...suet, lard, dripping...  
H11: I seem to remember him leaning over sort of a gate, like a, almost like a lych-gate...  
Q: and then...  
H11: ...I can't remember much...  
Q: ...they don't want, they don't want him to come in, because they're frightened he's going to go for their daughters, and he's trying to convince them that (?), I just want to go to the john...and then...and there's another bit that is in the book, which is not in this version, is in the, in the restaurant, where you've got this American couple, and there's a waitress, who comes up and takes an order for some food...  
H11: ...now that rings a bell as well, 'cos there's something in it about...Holiday Inn Skins or something...'have a nice fuck' or something...  
Q: it is. That's in the script; that's in the book.  
H11: I'm sure there was something like that in it.  
H13: So, what are you saying, you're saying the video version's been condensed, or...  
Q: Yes...or else...yes...it must...so I'll have to...  
H13: That's odd isn't it, I mean why should that, why should that be?  
Q: Nobody else has mentioned that to me, having remembered that as being in, you know, so it's interesting, and perhaps it was only some prints...  
H11: I'm sure it was there, I don't where else I'd have got it from, I'm certain there was a, I was actually, when I watched this, I was looking for a longer sequence in that...  
H13: What, what certificate did that have?  
Q: I think it was a...  
H13: Did they have 'AA's...was it 'AA'? or did they have numbers?  
Q: Was it '82...  
H13: I see, yes, no '83  
Q: ...I'm not sure...  
H13: I was just, I was just thinking about sexist jokes again; I supp...sexist...not sexist jokes, racist jokes; racist jokes are probably more valuable to the race they're...the

joke's about...and perhaps more positive, and destructive when they're spoken to people who have nothing to do with that particular group...because for the people who...say if you take a joke about a man walking down North Street in Leeds, which is a renowned place with lots of Jewish shops and houses, and he looks into his friend's window and he's scraping the wallpaper off the wall...it's ever such an old joke...and he says to him, '...you're redecorating, so-and-so,' Abe, or whatever, the man says, 'no, moving house'; now then, if you tell that to a non-Jewish person, then it will reinforce that stereotype they have of the Jewish person; but if you tell it to a Jewish person...

Q: ...no...if who tells it to a Jewish person?...

H13: ...if anybody, it doesn't matter; if a Jewish person...if a non-Jewish person hears that joke, whether...he might read it somewhere, you know...depending on the sort of person it is, it reinforces, perhaps, again it depends on the sort of person he is, the stereotype he has of the typical Jew...if a Jewish person reads that joke, is told that joke, it may, he may think now why are jokes like that being made about us, about our meanness, you know, perhaps there is something in our characteristic that has led to this idea...so, you know it's destructive if said to a non-Jew or a non-black or whatever, and perhaps a little more constructive if told to the person it's...I mean you can make jokes about the English or...you can generalise so much about them...or whatever...

Q: I'm not sure about...you see I'm not happy about this word 'constructive' because I think that...I mean there are jokes and jokes, and there are jokes like that which are relatively, I think there are characteristics which it's possible to sort of not take too seriously in itself...but there are a whole lot of racist jokes which are just plain...you know really unpleasant...and I think if somebody hears that then it's not a question of sort of learning to live with that characteristic in some way or sort of questioning it or something, I mean it just...it just increases...

H13: Oh yes, I mean there are degrees of racist jokes, I mean that...that's a relatively...I don't know that many really unpleasant ones...but I mean yes, they would be beyond the pale, if they were...but I mean, the funniest things are things which come out of observation, are they not? Well obviously they've got to be because you can't just dream things up out of the air, it's obviously some experience which has gone in and been digested and comes out; but it's when you, when you something of you becomes so contrived...

Q: That's what Terry, Terry Gilliam says; a lot of...a lot of his stuff...is from observation...

H13: But I mean...everything is, I mean it's...

H11: I think that what I find good about Python is that almost any situation you're in, you can think of a parallel that they've done; I drive my wife mad because, you know, I keep coming up with these...from the year dot, you know!...but that's right; you see something, and you can just see them doing it, and you can just see the way it goes, and you think crikey, you know...

Q: I could, I could be writing it myself...(laughter)...

H13: There's a...going back to the Grim Reaper, where they, where



the salmon mousse suddenly (imitates collapse)...and the spirits leave them, and then there's...there's an instance of them saying...it's almost like an afterthought, 'shall we take the cars?'...

I think, no I think, when they were conceiving a particular idea, they had this...they sort of...the special effects and said right, let's do the cars as well, that...you reinforce, and make the joke that bit, that bit funnier...but there's other occasions when they, when they don't sort of ext...take their ideas forward...which is a shame; and that's why I wonder, I'd love to know how they made it, in what order...

Q: Yes I think what happened was that they...

H13: I wonder if they looked at, I mean did they look upon it as six different films, or did they do a bit of this, a bit of that one, a bit of that one...

Q: Well I don't know, but what I've read is that they had quite a lot of ideas and sketches, extended sketches already written, and they couldn't find any way of putting them together, and somebody just had the idea, you know..

H13: ...expediency...(laughter)...

Q: ...look, we can put them like that, and it'll be like...you know, the sequence of life...

H13: ...no, having got that, I mean did they, did they complete one before going on to another one, I don't mean in the necessary order but...

H11: I would probably think they did because...they're very closely set, aren't they, I mean there's not a lot of different locations...they're all, each one is set ...so I would have thought they would have, it would have, you know, been sensible to have completed one before going on to another one...

H13: The fish idea was nice...with the heads and so forth! Again, I'm thinking of, I'd like to see...whenever I see goldfish there's always a great trail of shit dangling from them, you see, now not one of those had anything like this...

Q: ...lack of observation...

H13: ..and they do, they do other strange things, goldfish, and I thought, you know, it'd be so good if they did this!...though they were all sort of keeping their distance and swimming this way and that...that seemed to be a little sparse, could have been...just ready for a bit of development, that...

Q: What did either of you think of the Middle of the film?

H13: Now then...the middle of the film, Middle Age...

Q: Hunting the fish...

H13: Live organ transplants...Oh yes, I thought that was wonderful, that was the thing that saved the whole thing...you know that was the top spot of all of that...it was that first bit, 'hunting the fish',...(laughter)...that was a cracker! I mean had the fish not have been in, I...it wouldn't have got a '4'...but again you know you don't do much of that in the film...

Q: Yes...but I think you know you do get a polarisation

H13: ... (laughter/hilarity)...he goes 'thank youuu!')(?)

Q: ...you get a polarisation between people who really like that and people who (H13 laughter) are completely cold about it...

H13: I thought it was quite good...very funny...particularly the first time I saw it...

H13: (more laughter)...That's strange, I'd forgotten about that, but that...I enjoyed that...

Q: So...you would presumably say that's something that's missing generally in the rest of the film, is the absurd, is the really kind of dada absurd, which...

H13: Yes, yes...that's the, that's the only bit that's thrown in, isn't it...

Q: ...which you get a bit more of in...I suppose in the television programmes...the way they're constructed...you get a bit more of that sort of stuff...

H13: I mean there's a nice link in to the Middle of the Film... (laughter) with the African unzipping himself...the middle of the film!...all the leads in...leads-in are nice, I think, yes...

Q: Yes there's quite a nice one with Terry Jones covered in mud and taking his hands away from his face...battlefield...I... I thought I noticed, this was just a sort of...entirely subjective impression, I mean I was just sort of sitting there watching, and when we moved from section 2 to section 3, when we moved from...forgotten what it's called...sorry...

H13: ...Miracle of Birth, Growth and Learning...

Q: ...Fighting Each Other; I thought I suddenly noticed you (H13) laughing a lot more...

H13: From here to there?

Q: I...you seemed to enjoy the rugby...

H13: (laughing) Yes...it's very very funny...

Q: ...so I thought ah, sadist!

H13: Hang on, the rugby was in this bit, wasn't it...

Q: ...no it was at the beginning of Fighting Each Other...

H13: Was it? Oh...

Q: That's where I put it...

H13: Oh I see...oh you did, didn't you...

Q: ...because it's to do with fighting...I thought...got this sadistic streak, (H13 laughing)...he's laughing at people having their faces trampled in the mud...

H13: I mean there could have been...I mean you haven't got anything here, you know, sadomasochism or anything like that, it's all sort of...this questionnaire...

Q: ...I'll be reading between the lines! No I mean, that's... I mean compiling all this stuff, it was very difficult to, the original idea, actually, I mean it was a sort of pipe-dream, to actually virtually psychoanalyse people...how do you do it?!...you know, to find out something about peoples'... sort of you know...pulsions and sort of...and you know that is fascinating, whether people laugh more at violent humour which is kind of...unpleasant...

H13: But the thing...but the thing about that...you see we used to

play rugby against the boys at Jan's school...and there it was the reverse, you see...I mean it wasn't the masters sort of...it was the lads...they were up here and I'm down here you see! it was just so funny!...(laughter)...

Q: ...(?) and crippled!

H13: Yes...people were, weren't they...staff were...you know... I had to, I mean I was in a dreadful state once...oh dear!... but there's that to do with it as well, you see.

H11: Talking about that, it was a bit distant, but with that one, my oldest son got beaten up, a couple of weeks back, in Hemel Hempstead, quite badly beaten up, and...but, fine, yes I was very upset at the time, but looking at that, and there was a small little part in that, where there's a couple of blokes, I think one had hold of this lad's arm, the other one putting the boot in, and I thought that was, that was very funny, it was just...you probably wouldn't notice it, but, because it was over very quickly 'cos it was while the camera was following something else, but it was just the little piece in the back there, that...

H13: But again if you had two thugs doing that, you know, two blokes with tatoos up their arms, you wouldn't laugh, but because you know they're schoolmasters...that's made you laugh...

H11: Yes and the headmaster coming out with his foot...(laughter)..

H13: (laughter) Yes, that's the bit I laughed at, that lad has the ball, you know...

Q: I think maybe that's something else, it's exaggeration, isn't it...it's very important to a lot of humour...I mean there's a lot of...exaggeration...

H11: I mean certainly with violence, I find that that kind of violence is no sweat, I mean I can take that; but I mean it's when you get the sort of television sequences about the violence that's actually happened, like someone's let a bomb go off in a store or something, there's people all over the street with sort of bits off them and, you know, that's completely another field...but you know it's not happening to anyone, it's, you know, it's there for a laugh and I think it makes it easy to laugh at...

H13: But I mean the juxtaposition of the rugby field and then the First World War, I mean, poses the question, do people, do men fight one another in wars because they indulge in rough games like rugby at school...is this encouraging the... belligerence in people? Is it nurturing something which we all know is there but...

Q: I don't...I don't read it like that, I just read it as a transition...from one scene...

H13: Yes, no, yes...but I mean you could, you could take it like that, couldn't you, and you can see, there are the masters of the school, encouraging this mayhem, if you like..and you're laughing at it and the thing that makes it funny is that, as you were saying, when the kid's being kicked in, it's because it is by schoolteachers, but on the other hand, you know, for schoolteachers read establishment, this perpetual nurturing of, making sure that somebody's warlike feelings are always, are always kept honed...don't do anything to sort of channel those those...that violence into a more constructive way, they just make sure, you know, that.

Q: You have got then that other sketch...playing the piano and 'rather be reading a book'

Well I think we've covered everything that I wanted to, unless there's anything else...

H13: I don't...I mean when, normally when I see a film, I'm not, it's usually the next day or some time afterwards when I... when I start to think about it or...

Q: You get yourself a tape and tape...

H13: No I mean that's...no I'm purely thinking of you...you're talking to lots and lots of people, and I'm sure lots of people think like this...in that, you know they digest things, think about it...or perhaps you don't want, you don't want...

H11: ...you want sort of immediate reactions rather than sort of...

Q: I think it is, yes, I think it is immediate reactions, yes because considered reactions might well be, might well be after talking to somebody else about it, for instance...

#### TAPE 4: L13, L16

Q: Could start of with...generally, what are your responses to Meaning of Life?

L16: I found it very, extremely funny, for me...even if you don't laugh at something, it...makes me, I don't know I really like it...

L13: I liked it a lot better this time than when I first saw it in a cinema, I think...because I went with someone who really didn't like it and objected to it's...(?)<sup>credibility</sup>...and I picked upon that...this time I think I found it enjoyable...though I mean the problem with this film is I think it's significantly different from the other Pythons...and it doesn't have a great deal of the kind of manic humour, or successfully manic humour, I kind of appreciated in...the TV series...

Q: Yes...yes that's already raised two or three particular points; I mean one, the relation between seeing it again and seeing it the first time...what about you, (L16)?

L16: I mean the first time, you know, I really really...there are moments, I wasn't expecting this kind of humour, you know, I've seen all the others before, like Holy Grail is more poetic, and more...but that one, like you know, the scene in the restaurant, I mean I didn't know how far they<sup>will</sup> go, and then it make me really laugh and laugh, and there were other moments, I started to get bored, and the second time, I enjoyed more the film on the same kind of level, you know, like the moment where they are, you know the Catholic church and the Protestants, the first time I didn't know if I have to laugh or not, and knowing the film now, I think it's extremely funny, you know, because even if it, it looks a bit, could be upsetting for some people, but for me, I know they don't mean it, really, you would say on a first level, you know you have to take this kind of critique...

Q: ...take a distance...

L16: Yes, it's like, you know, when you see all them dancing and after you get this famous scene with the couple, protestant, it makes the scene completely...for me, it has a meaning, if you want...

Q: Yes...yes...I mean, there's a difference, you felt in a sense

inhibited the first time you saw it...

L16: No...I laugh really because I've seen all their films and I saw...I saw most of their shows on television, not all of them especially in the '70s, but I saw them when they were repeated, and I like what they do, you know outside Monty Python, very much, so first to see them makes me laugh already, you know,...make me giggle, you know, but...I don't know, I said, I was really, yew, at the very moment I didn't know where they wanted to go, so that one moment I was really laughing like mad, another moment I...was not embarrassed, but I didn't know what they meant really...so when I saw it the second time and...just...and the third time, I enjoyed it very much, I must say...

Q: Whereas in your case (L13) you said you actually were sort of inhibited by being with somebody else...

L13: I was with somebody who I think objected to particular, not so much the, not the criticism of the Church or anything, but just things like the, you know the baby dropping at the beginning and that kind of thing...I think she found it kind of sexist, offensive in a number of ways...that I picked up on, and I felt responsible because I said OK, let's...see a Monty Python movie...so...

Q: That's an important point, isn't it, yes, I mean whether appreciation or finding something funny, is obviously partly determined by the circumstances, I mean, how do you feel, perhaps being here today, affects it in any way...

L13: Umm...I enjoyed it more, this time round, but I also agree that...I mean I think I got a better sense of a kind of coherent movie...I mean I don't think that that movie was particularly funny overall; I mean it left me feeling fairly down, actually, the whole, the whole film, made me feel...then that's what it's trying to do, I think...it's a statement about the human condition in a way the other films aren't...

Q: Yes that's right yes, a couple of the people I talked to on Thursday said something like that as well, that although they marked some things as being quite funny, it was difficult to say, really, because although they are funny, there is something else about them as well...

L16: Oh yes, that's true, yes...I mean, everything they're saying it's, even...it's against something, you know in the society actually, you know, and they're laughing at themselves too, a lot, that's why it's very...and they were trying for example, that, the sequence in the school where they really talk on sex but everything, all the detail, you know, it's like, you really start, not to feel embarrassed, but you're not used, you know, to this kind of...and after, if you accept it, it's going to be extremely funny, because you imagine, you imagine all those people who repress all these expressions, you know...

Q: Well, in relation to that, that raises exactly the point that, I think there are points in that film, and...I wasn't actually sort of watching and listening to you, but I mean once or twice, with you and the others as well, it raises this question, that are there points at which just hearing somebody say 'penis' or...or seeing John Cleese's bum or something...anything like that...just, just something sexual, do you think that can actually make...

L16: For me...I must say, for me there are only a few words...

I don't understand all those words you know on sex for example, like only a few slang words,...say in slang, but, I don't, for example there are words I still don't understand, for me you know, so, I only saw it, I never saw it when it was subtitled, you know, because...so there are still some expressions in the film I just don't understand, I must say...

Q: ...but do you think that there are, I mean either for you or perhaps for other people, you can sort of say what you think for other people, do you think it's possible for things to be ...to be funny just because they're, they're crude, or vulgar, without being in a joke form?

L16: I...it's really strange, because I don't find that sequence very very funny, it makes me laugh inside, you know it doesn't shock me, but, I don't feel like laughing like some other parts of the film, you know? It's...I don't know, I just can't...it doesn't shock me at all, I mean, because I do understand that point of view, what they want to do, but I can understand, if you see it, you know in a big cinema and the audience doesn't respond very much, so you can start to feel embarrassed, I can (have) this feeling...

L13: There are very, there are very sort of different levels of attitudes to sex in the movie; I mean on one hand you've got the very explicit discussion in the class, the classroom, which actually did, did...you get kind of saturated with the stuff, and I think they actually achieved a genuine shocking capacity somehow in that scene, in the dialogue of that scene to a certain extent, but then you've got these sort of half-naked women chasing around, and that's using sex in it's very sort of traditional Carry-On film type of way...and that's one of the problems of the film, is that ~~it~~<sup>they</sup> can't quite decide what they're doing, I mean...

Q: Yes, or is made up of...hotch-potch in that sense...I mean, for instance when the...at the beginning of the restaurant scene, where Eric Idle's Noel Coward...immediately, he says 'Isn't it frightfully nice to have a penis?!...I noticed that you just sort of...laughed a little bit at that moment... what made you laugh at that?

L13: Um...well it wasn't just, I don't know, it wasn't just the mention of the word 'penis'...no, it was the juxta...the incongruity, the comedy lies in the incongruity...

L16: I think the fact that he's singing in a very posh restaurant with very smart, I mean upper-class people, and he's...how do you say, Noel Coward, sings, and it's...very good, makes me laugh, not what he's saying, but more in, you know in the context of everything, you know...he would have said the same thing, in a different, it would have been different to there, because everyone looks, seems very normal, they applaud at the end, say 'Oh very nice'...it's...they wanted to show the absurdity of language and the way we, you know we're using it, why is it shocking to say 'penis' 'penis' or I don't know, you know, it would be not shocking to say another word...I mean you can...really talk a lot about...

Q: I mean that raises as well another question that when can we distinguish between what's funny and what is pleasurable, you know, enjoyable in other ways...Somebody mentioned again on Thursday that they found it difficult to actually fill in that sheet, because of sort of saying, they enjoyed a particular sequence, but it was difficult to say if it was funny...

- L13: Exactly; I gave, there are a lot of 'moderately funny's and kind of 'averagely funny's on...
- L16: For me, I put, I put, well one extremely funny; I must say the scene in the restaurant makes me laugh, I don't know why but it just makes me laugh, maybe because, the total absurdity of the scene and... and then, they went so far, and for me it's really incredible...and other scenes, like at the end, you know there are moments like...is it Eric Idle, when he he leaves the restaurant and...well, you know, I don't think it's, I know what he wants to say, but I think...he went to a (?) and something, and I didn't find it funny...but it's true, there are moments extremely funny, it's very difficult to put 'extremely funny'...'moderately funny'...
- Q: ...other kinds of enjoyment, other kinds of pleasure, yes...
- L16: I found for example that if I compare with The Holy Grail, I felt less pleasureable to watch as a movie, you know; in Holy Grail I remember the moments which are really pleasureable to see, to watch, you know like...'cos they were beautiful, they were a kind of poetry coming out of there; there it's completely different...but there are moments I really enjoyed, yes...I mean the beginning, with this dance like in Oliver, you know, all those...nurses and...I think it's quite funny...
- L13: I don't know...I mean in terms of just pleasure, I had a greater conception of this as a movie...it also had, and I'm not sure it actually works in its favour, it had higher production values than most of the others, or at least the you know, TV Monty Python, or the earlier, first films, and it seemed to, the pirate thing at the beginning, seemed to have all the...afford to kind of create that effect, the kind of noisy sweep, you know...
- Q: ...yes...and also the fact that the different parts are set in completely different locales...
- L13: Yes, yes...
- Q: ...so that you know you're not always in the Middle Ages
- L13: Yes, right...
- Q: ...practically...you're actually switching from one sort of place to another...
- L13: Well I felt that the way, I don't know whether, maybe the way you'd divided it up into sections, I mean, seemed to, the sections seemed to kind of absorb lots of different kinds of types of humour, and I found it diff...I found it hard to... I mean there'd be like...one particularly, there'd be a particularly absurd moment that'd have me rolling about... (be into it?), then there'd be, in the same package as it were, there'd be a stretch that was relatively, I thought was really boring, I found it hard to decide how I should express my reactions, as a total...
- Q: I think, yes, that's a problem I had...I know exactly what you mean, and the only way round that I think would have been to have like twenty sections...
- L16: Yes, in a way, even if you...I found, I went to see some Festival of Cartoons, you know, the best cartoons, you know, and you re...everyone's laughing like mad for the first two or three car...and then after you laugh less and less because you're losing...I don't know, you always find, they are the same, I think they are still as..the last one is as funny as

the first one; Tom and Jerry, some of the hreat ones, you know, really...but you, it's like Laurel and Hardy, you know you really laugh a lot at the first one, and after, then you just can't, or you lose your ability to laugh...

Q: Right, but then...then...a lot of us still watch, I mean I don't watch it that much, but I mean quite often if Laurel and Hardy or something like that is on the telly, I'll still watch it...now why is that, because I'm not going to sit there and roll on the floor and find it extremely funny; what are the other pleasures that are, that make us watch that sort of thing over and over again?

L16: For me, it that film I'm sure I saw things I didn't see the first time or the second time, because...I know for example the gag, I know the story, I know what's going to happen, so I'm watching more round the...so you found you...or you found for example the Python characters, they dress in a different way...

Q: I think something another person identified was actually the pleasure of the, of the performance...of the performance...

L13: What, 'cos of the actors, expressions, that kind of thing; yes, oh yes, particularly Cleese, oh I think it's absolutely true, yes...

Q: ...although there are still...somebody actually said the other day that they didn't...didn't go for Cleese's films all that much, they preferred to watch Michael Palin...

L13: Yes, yes...

Q: ...that's exactly it...yes...

L16: But I found for example the...the short, you know the, on the In surance, that for me is absolutely incredible, I mean it's really really...at the same time it's pleasure, you know because there are so many references in all those old movies, you know...Erroll Flynn movies, and everything...or Ben Hur... and this (is) really incredibly clever and funny, I really... very poetic even at some moments; the idea, you know this old building, floating and...they're taking everything out, using like on a boat, it's... I really found...very very funny... that one very pleasureable, there was nothing, you know like the other, you were saying you know with the babies or, you can be shocked even in the restaurant with all the food and everything; but there it's only a real pleasure to watch...

Q: But that raises, that does raise the question of what kind of ...sort of equipment one needs to be able to appreciate it... see what I, knew what I mean? What kinds of people do you think Monty Python in general, or this film in particular, what people it sort of appeals to...

L13: They're sort of trying to cover all bases, really, aren't they, in a way...

Q: You think this one is more so?

L13: Well...I don't know, I mean it's got all these film reference and things...

L16: Yes, if you are a movie buff you enjoy it even more than someone who doesn't go very often to the cinema, because you just realize, there's something clicking in your mind...

Q: Yes, that's true...

L13: But then Monty Python was always like that really...you'd have parodies...



- Q: Yes...that's what I'm getting at, what kinds of people would have been watching the television programmes in '69 to '74... Did you see them?
- L13: I saw...most of them I did see, I know they were on late, at the beginning they were on very late at night,
- Q: ...and irregularly, yes...
- L13: I don't know...I seem to remember it was, I can remember it was quite slow catching on...particularly the first series wasn't terribly well appreciated...
- L16: Yes, I'm watching the you know...
- Q: ...the repeats...
- L16: yes, again, but it's very funny, I don't, maybe because I wasn't in England at the time, so I can't make any reference on what they're saying, but one evening I watched it and I didn't find it funny at all, it was clever, I could see, you know, what they were saying, but I didn't laugh at all, one moment...it was two weeks ago...
- Q: So in a sense it's dated...
- L16: It might have dated a little bit...the one last week was quite funny, with Terry Jones dressing up like an archbishop.. bishop and going running in the street in London, you know like a James Bond movie...that was funny, yes...the one, the previous one,...
- L13: Yes, what's funny, in terms of shocking people, I can remember watching that on one of those early repeats, with...with my friend who was the son of the local vicar, you know, I remember his father getting up and turning it off because he was so pissed off with it...he just (?)...in terms of what shocks people, it obviously did have some sort of effect...
- Q: Yes, yes...That's got something to do with the, you know what we've just been talking about, it goes for two sort of areas; one is the intellectual abstract appreciation of sort of filmic references and other references, and so on; and the other thing is to do, as you say, with a more...something which people can be shocked by, or which can be attacks on institutions...or else sexual, sex or violence or something... and, I mean, whyfor instance, can you say anything about what I said, about why, as you say you found the restaurant scene very funny...any particular reasons...
- L16: Well it's...no, I just can't explain it because really it should shock me but...that enormous person coming inside the restaurant, first as I say it was a shock when I (saw) it the first time, I didn't know where they wanted to go, and I said OK it's, you know, John Cleese, French waiter, all the cliches in all the movies, all right...and after, when they, he started to bring, it's only the way for example you see that woman, she's cleaning and she receives everything on her back, I mean it's, I don't know, I can't explain why it makes me laugh, I've no idea really; it's just because, it's like you know, a cartoon, you know, there's no logic, you see him exploding at the end, and you see his watch ticking and his heart and everything; I mean...such great ideas, absolutely fantastic...the gag in itself is not funny at all, but...I know for example I've got a friend, he saw it in France, I mean he said people were really dying laughing during that sequence, you know, because...well Monty Python's quite a, kind of cult (?) in Paris, but I mean really it's amazing...

I found it really very funny...it didn't sh...I mean, I don't mean I was shocked by some other sequences, but I can understand, like the one in the 'Third World', the Third World called Yorkshire, you know, and saying all those, I said, well you know, I don't know how to judge it, I found it funny but it's, it can be offensive, I can understand...

L13: I found that funny, and I'm from Yorkshire!...but...

L16: ...but I mean, you know exactly that they don't mean it really, you know...I mean they, it's a kind of, because there is a cliché, you know, so they're using that cliché against, against us...

Q: Well I think there is a problem there, isn't there, of saying about comedy, ~~that~~ oh, they don't mean it, so it's all right, I mean I think that's, that's, I don't really, most of the time I don't really accept that as an argument, because in a sense it's still, it's still there as a representation...

L16: Yes, I know what you mean, but I don't know why I...

Q: ...and it reinforces...

L16: ...I laugh, I will laugh because they are laughing, you know, I don't know I can't explain really, I don't know why it doesn't shock me...

Q: Yes, I mean in general if...another thing I'm interested in is whether one can laugh at things which normally one would say, oh I don't laugh about things like that, I mean outside this film, about racist jokes or sexist jokes and things like that; you see what I mean there's a sense in which one can actually find a racist joke or something actually 'funny', because one...there's something clever about it, or something; and I think sometimes that goes on in films like this, I mean whether one finds oneself drawn into the, say the, perhaps the possible sexism of the women chasing the bloke near the end...

L13: But I felt in a sense that this film was rather unconvincingly striving for balance or something in a way that...I mean, people kept kicking around Bunuel as a kind of comparison when this came out...but when they are going to critique catholicism they have to put a balancing critique of protestantism, which I didn't think was that funny, I felt that I could almost see them thinking, we can't get away with this, we've got to have, you know the balancing statement in there; I felt also there's this peculiar sort of comment at the end where they were kind of trying to excuse themselves by making that statement about "let's have lots of pictures of penises so we can get the shock-value, you know...kind of incorporate what may well have been their strategy, in a way, into, into the film...

Q: ...without having to, not having been able to do it in the film, really...Cos there is...in the original script, or in the Book of the Film at least there is a sketch which isn't in the film, which is of Martin Luther, who's Jewish...which just isn't...it's quite...

L13: Martin, sorry, Martin Luther...

Q: ...as Jewish.

L13: Oh I see...

Q: Yes...oh no, hang on, Martin Luther arrives at a Jewish family, yes, it's very much as a heavy Jewish stereotype, and Martin Luther is this rampant sex-starved character who,

who's always after the daughters...they try to keep Martin Luther away from the daughters...(?)...(L13 laughs) That's, it's interesting that that didn't end up in the film...

L13: ...because of the Jewish stereotype...

Q: ...well I suspect, yes, I'm not sure, that's something perhaps I ought to find out about, but it's not in the film, obviously...

Let's just have a look and see if there's anything else... I mean we touched a little bit, I mean, on why you think other people may not like it or find it funny, I mean...mentioned, (L13), that, you know one or two examples of people who were shocked by particular things...

L13: Umm...I mean I think, yes you've got to be attuned to that kind of humour to begin with, I think...so what do you mean, why should, why do I think other people should be shocked by it?

Q: Yes, I mean for what sorts of reasons do other people not like it, I mean we mentioned people perhaps who have religious associations who were shocked by that, or as you said, the, was it woman you saw it with before, who was shocked by, well maybe not shocked, but who objected to them, certain images...

L13: Yes...

Q: I'm just wondering if those are the, if that's the only way of looking at it, maybe there, whether there are other things, I mean people who perhaps don't like the liver transplant or the...

L13: Well yes I can think of lots of people who would just be... it's very difficult because in a sense if the film's justification is to shock, I mean, perhaps, they're the people on whom it works most effectively, you know, it's a problem, if it's setting out to...shock, in a way,...I know, yes, I mean I can think of a lot of people I can just put down, who would be really, would get up and walk out...not because they objected to it on moral grounds or anything, but just because they found it physically, just...you know, even a serious film with a lot of violence in it, they'd get up and walk out, the same thing there...

Q: So the important thing to question then is, why is it that some people's response to physical, I mean the exploding Mr Creosote (?), for me it's partly that as well...while some people respond by rejecting the whole thing, there are some people who can enter into it and actually find it funny...

L16: I found myself, you know, in a lot of things, films, I just can't watch real, for example, an injection, or something like that, I wouldn't mind to have it myself but I can't watch it; and that, the organ...live transplant...I think... because, it's the way it's done, I don't know why, they really, they arrive like butchers and...the guy's...you don't see anything, but, and everything is over the top, you know, the blood coming...and...it's a joke, I mean, that's the way I take it, if you take it, you know, seriously,

L13: But it is just, it is just kind of evocative enough to, to make you slightly queasy, it's not, it's not so kind of parodic...

L16: But...it is a parody but if you've seen other films like, you know, they're talking, I saw a film on television where they were bringing some Asian or Indian people in England and they

were taking one of their kidneys to sell to rich people who needed a transplant...what was this...Coma, this film, this American film, did you see it? where they got Kirk Douglas, no, Richard Widmark was a surgeon, and they were, all the patients were really healthy, and they were operating (on) them...OK they were killing them in a certain way, and they were taking their kidneys, and their liver or anything, and they were, all the things were kept in a, they were all kept in a huge clinic somewhere outside...and it was absolutely frightening, but there, they come, two guys coming and... 'excuse me, we need your liver'...it's a joke, something on the society...I agree with you, either you take it or you don't take it, but it's...I know a lot of friends, I mean my family wouldn't understand this kind of joke, I don't know why it makes me, this makes me laugh...

Q: In fact now you've mentioned it, I mean just...I saw something in the paper a few weeks ago exactly about people taking live organs from people...I think it was in South America, maybe in Brazil, somewhere like that...

L16: Yes, some people are selling their...

Q: ...there is a market...

L16: and that...that play, I think it was on BBC2 a few months ago, it was really frightening, it was like a thriller but...those people they were paying I don't know, a thousand pounds, they came to England to have an operation somewhere...outside London in a ...and they were taking, were given one kidney and they OK they were flown back to India, of course, one had a kind of disease and everything came out but those kidneys or...were kept, because they were sold to private clinics where rich patients...need them...OK it was a play but little by little you can see it coming, you know, ...

L13: Some of the things that appealed to me in that film were the least...were the ones that were kind of least motivated by any sort of sense of social satire...I couldn't pin them down but that whole business about finding the fish, which I just found really funny, and totally bizarre, and I couldn't actually pin down but I don't know, what...do you know what... what are their references for that, the guy with the elephant's head, and all this funny...

Q: I don't know...except dada, beyond saying that, that doesn't explain, well it does and it doesn't...

L13: ...but I mean it may be why it struck me as having this genuine sense of the absurd, you know...

Q: Yes...yes I mean I think that's very important, I mean I found myself responding to things like that as well, and there is very much...there is that strand in this film, but it's not as strong as in say in the television series...

L16: Yes but maybe in a film they have to do something, you know, which, to give a kind of story or to give something...I'm sure you, I did watch their first film which was made from sketches from television, you know, and it's very, it's extremely...I found it extremely unfunny, I really appreciated but, I watched it even with two people, I remember, and no-one was laughing...only one moment I really found funny, it's all those old women attacking young people in the park, I mean the reversal of...that was funny...(agreement)...but like at the end when they, the Olympic Games for the disabled with three coffins, you know, I mean, it does make me laugh but,

I do appreciate the...I don't know, it's difficult to explain why it doesn't shock me, I don't know why, I just can't, cannot explain, you know, and I'm very conscious of racism and everything, I just don't understand why it does...there's a guy in France, he's really saying jokes, you know, and he and he was saying a joke about you know all those French people living in Algeria, when they came back at the end of the war...

Q: ...who was that...

L16: Guy Bedos...

Q: Guy Bedos yes...

L16: ...yes, and he had a...how do you say, a sketch, not a sketch, a...we say sketch in France, which is different in England; it's a story if you want...the story of those French people called 'black feet' (pieds noirs), you know, and they're flying on a Moroccan or Algerian airline, and he's imitating one saying, you know, the pilot, even, he just can't read properly even...you know, and he was playing the...the game of those people commenting, you know, and everyone, I mean if you were against racism you would laugh because he was laughing at those people, but those people, they were really laughing because they thought he was laughing at the, the Algerians or Moroccans...and he had to stop to say it, because he said, for him, he knew what he wanted to say, but both sides did understand the same way...

Q: Was it a thing called 'Les Arabes'?

L16: Yes, could be, I don't remember...but I remember, in one interview he just couldn't believe it, you know, the people he was criticizing for their racism, they really didn't understand his story at all...

Q: ...which is a bit like Till Death Us Do Part and the Alf Garnett figure in which...have you seen that?...Till Death Us Do Part, which was a...

L16: Oh yes...yes, I saw it...I don't like the second, the second ...(?)...the first, I saw the first (part), some of them, I found some of them quite funny, I mean, he is obviously so racist and so, I mean it's so caricatural, all those people, I mean that's the way I take it...

Q: ...it had the same problem, a lot of people watched that and found themselves sort of...agreeing with him...(echoed by L16) which is...

L16: It's like if you watch the Lubitch movie about the last war, what was that, with Carole Lombard, and everything, you know, and they...all the jokes on concentration, concentration camps and everything...

L13: To Be Or Not To Be...

L16: Yes, To Be Or Not To Be, I mean, it could be, could take it as a very shocking thing when you really see the real documents about it...and you still laugh at it, I don't know why you can explain it...and Lubitch was a, probably a...I would think about Jews or something like that and he was...I don't know, he was a German, or something...he escaped to America...

Q: Yes, I mean that's, that's an important problem, um an important distinction, isn't it, the distinction between the kind of comedy which is irrational, and absurd, and the one

which is to do with society or history...

L16: Yes...I think, sorry to interrupt you, but, I think, I agree with you, that's why maybe I laugh, it's more irrational, totally absurd, you know, as well; if it would be based on a true, really documentary or realistic, I wouldn't laugh... or maybe I would be bored or shocked...

Q: ...and yet, I mean, the restaurant, the exploding Mr Creosote, as you said it does, it is also a social attack...

L16: Yes, yes, oh I understand that, you know, overf...overfed and everything...

Q: Perhaps...perhaps the reason why some of those work so well is because of the combination of the absurd and a social attack...if it's too recognizable as just a simple social attack, maybe it doesn't work so well, and if it's completely absurd some people will not respond to it...it's perhaps a combination...I mean another question is, is to do with exaggeration; I mean how does that work? Because that's important in scenes like that, isn't it? When does exaggeration work and when does it not work? (Brief interruption)...Um yes I mean how does, when is exaggeration...when does it work and when doesn't it? Because there's obviously a lot of it about in Monty Python.

L13: Yes...well I mean, the kind of physical exaggeration...

Q: Yes. There's the Mr Creosote, obviously a gross exaggeration... I mean I don't have any particular line on this, I'm just sort of...It's clearly an important element...

L16: For me, I think exaggeration has to be in a comedy or something like that; if it's in a thriller, or in a movie sometimes I just switch off and I really get fed up and bored with all the, you know, blood, more blood, and really you start laughing, like Texas Chainsaw Massacre, I saw it at the National one evening, I remember, and at one moment you don't know if you have to laugh or not, and suddenly, everyone, you have to laugh because if you don't laugh, either you are frightened or you're, you leave...

Q: ...so what you're saying is...

L16: ...it's like (?) I saw it and...after half an hour I thought, am I leaving, it's OK, I'm going to stay, and I just didn't care at all for the people, what's happening on the screen, because it was over the top and, it's completely irrational, so for me, irrational or absurd has to be comedy or...I don't know, something like that, you know it works really in this department but not really in a...

Q: So exaggeration...

L16: ...er, it has to have a logic, like when you see for example what was it this thing on television, a thriller with a reference with you know atom, atomic...with the word 'Edge' in it...

Q: Oh...Edge Of Darkness?

L16: Edge of Darkness. That's over the top in a certain way, if you want...you know, but I really, that's really gripped me, because it's really something which can happen, which already happened...and in a comedy or a cartoon I can take it very easily, I don't know why...

L13: Yes I mean that's where the background comes from, it is from cartoon, isn't it, it's from caricature...

- L16: It's true, (?) at a certain moment they are at the limit, you know, you say OK that's Monty Python so...could be, I can understand that other people don't appreciate it at all.
- Q: Yes; and the thing I'm interested in, among other things, is sort of the purely unconscious ways in which we, the reasons we respond you know, to some...to, say, the exploding Mr Creosote, or whether we switch off and say that's, that's just disgusting, horrible, don't want anything to do with it...
- L13: It's absolutely disgusting but...
- Q: ...or whether we can, yes OK, but whether we can say yes, all right, it does look disgusting but I still find it funny; I mean that to me, in a sense, I mean I'll come clean about it, is to do, I think, with our sort of psych...psychological-psychic sort of state...to do with our sort of, you know, early childhood and so on...whether we find those things threatening and distressing or whether we...
- L13: I think we do, I mean there's...a lot of laughter in that was a kind of defensive exorcism kind of laughter, you know, I think...and certainly when you start talking about things like, you know, Chainsaw Massacre, then the laugh, I haven't seen that particular film, but the laughter, the laughter is a response, you know, that prevents you, you know exorcises fear...
- L16: Yes, yes, it is...well, as I said, there are, yes, there are all the movies, or movie or thriller, where you don't feel like laughing even if they are over the top...the way the director maybe uses it, but...I don't know...there must be a reason why we are...I don't know because, as you say, you would see it, that scene in the restaurant, you would start to be, you would walk out, or you would be disgusted, and you should be disgusted, you know, there is nothing more...
- Q: Or else after seeing this film, you probably wouldn't be, you'd probably find it funny...(laughter)...
- L16: Yes! Maybe...
- L13: But there's lots of unmotivated violence in Monty Python outside; or sort of gruesomeness outside that, I mean, the knight having his legs and arms chopped off until he's hopping around spurting blood...or those scenes where the kind of hand...there's like somebody watching TV and the hand comes out of the TV and pulls someone's eyeballs out of their socket and kind of (?) them or something; I suppose that is a comment of sorts but...
- Q: Yes, I mean I think there's some debate about who's, I mean the individuals responsible for it, and John Cleese and Graham Chapman wrote the violent sketches, apparently, but...but Terry Gilliam's animations are quite...not so much in this film but...they're quite 'violent'...
- L16: But...it's very funny because if you take all their films when they don't play together, you know like Brazil, or The Missionary or John Cleese and you know Fawlty Towers, I mean there's still something which you found, you know which belongs to Monty Python, you know, it's very funny; but in a different way; Brazil is really like a Monty Python film; I found The Missionary, all the Michael Palin, very gentle and very, sometimes very very funny with absurd scenes, like in The Missionary I remember that scene with the valet, you know, in the castle, he just can't find his way...and it's absolutely hilarious, you know, because each time he's taking

people around he just (can't) remember the way, it's the kind of thing which, it's got a different sense of humour, it's less aggressive...for example John Cleese in Fawlty Towers... the one with the rat, you know the Inspector, and the other one with the dead guest in a room! I mean absolutely...I've seen (them) several times, but I'm really laughing...because, and it's very clever, the way it's done, you know, the way he plays with all the characters...

Q: Yes, but the character itself...I mean his own character is symptomatically impressive...

L16: Very, Yes, yes...Of course he has to, you know, with the poor, what's the name, Manuel, he's always beating him, you know, having fun against some of the guests, or...

Q: I think, I can't remember who said it, but there's somebody who said in Monty Python programmes any scene which starts with lyrical music and a pan across the country side was written by Palin and Jones...they wrote those sorts of openings sort of pan across the countryside and you see this incongruous figure standing there, sort of...this was their influence...

L16: Yes, they're more poetic and more...yes that's funny...

Q: ...and in fact there's a, there's an article, I think, no there's an interview with John Palin in 'Cineaste', Michael Palin, about why they wrote different sorts of sketches and it was to do with the fact, he has this theory, about the fact that they came from Oxford and Cambridge; the two universities encouraged different types of world-views; one is more sort of rural and idyllic and the other one is...

L16: ...I went the other day,...a friend invited me, she had a ticket to see 'The Mikado' with Eric Idle, and I didn't remember, you know I didn't, you know John Cleese but Eric Idle for me is not as well known, I know the face, but the name...and when he came on stage I mean all the audience was absolutely laughing mad, and he was using so many references of the actuality, you know, when he was (?), and he had such, he was absolutely terrific...he is not a great singer, you know, but the way, did you see it, no?

L13/Q No, I haven't seen it but...

L16: But if you, if you, the way he was using the stage, you know walking and looking at the audience and really using the audience; absolutely amazing piece of...you know, acting, I really...

Q: So again, what that brings us back to is the fact that it's not just what's funny; there are all these other pleasures to be gained...

L16: Oh yes...

Q: ...other sorts of, you know, admiration of acting, performance, character and so on...

L16: And...the other thing I like with Python, you know, in the same scene, you can see the same actor dressed in different ways, like in the jungle, you know, you see Eric Idle, he's lost his leg, but he's dressed as a tiger...it's a kind of pleasure, too, you know, it's (?) the total absurdity...

Q: Yes...I think that's, that's another thing that undercuts this question we were talking about of possible sexism and the fact that at one point Mr Creosote's vomiting over a cleaning-woman;



L16: But he vomits really...on John Cleese...

Q: Yes...and then also John Cleese picks up this bucket and... somebody pointed out that that would be different if it was a woman, if it was played by a woman...

L16: Could be, yes...

L13: That's true, yes...

Q: The fact that it's one of the Pythons in drag actually changes the meaning of it, one actually can't talk about it being a representation of, you know, women being treated in such a way...

L16: ...yes...but I don't know, I can't help laughing in that scene because, she is, you know, cleaning the floor and suddenly she is talking, she was at the Prado and the British Museum and the Academie Francaise, and the other one is probably...the waiter has got fed up, and he put all the...(laughing)... that's why I laugh, you know, because...she's just doing some cheap philosophy, you know, and...

Q: Well, no, it's because she says 'I never worked for Jews'...

L16: (laughing)...yes, I...I know...maybe sometimes you laugh, and you should feel, not sorry or guilty but...it could happen, you know...

L13: Well (we) said that there's a lot of pleasure to be derived just from seeing someone having, not necessarily a bucket of vomit, but just a...bucket of any, of paint or anything, emptied all over them..

Q: ...like slipping on a banana-skin...

L13: Yes, any simple slapstick style of comedy...

L16: ...it's like a...yes, it's like, you know, you can watch, this famous Laurel and Hardy, you know, they fight with all the cakes and cream and everything, and it's, you can...

Q: ...custard pies...

L16: ...custard pies, you can see it a hundred times, you still will laugh, you know...

Q: Yes...a bit less maybe but, yes...I mean there is a, again somebody has written about the fact that in that situation, there are three sort of ways of looking at it; you can either - it's a complicated model, but you can either see it, get a humorous response, or you can get a sympathetic response, in which basically you'll be sorry for the person, or else you have a scientific response, you'll try to work out why they fell over, or you'd be a doctor sort of trying to attend to what's wrong, or something like that...

L16: Well I'm sure there is a reason, you know, why you laugh... like the other thing, you know, when you see, sorry to get out of Monty Python but in Laurel and Hardy, when they come and they start to...to, you know, they want to talk to someone in a house and they, OK...he (?); so they start breaking the house, he's breaking their car, and I mean...it's a kind of build-up, and you shouldn't laugh, it's not really funny, when you say it, but the way it's done...the aggressivity; maybe you, you release your own ag...I've no idea why you...

Q: I think there's, I mean one of the Freudian things is that pleasure in that kind of comic is comparing how you, what energy you would expend...

L16: ...yes, if you were...

Q: ...with the, how wrong the energy is that somebody else is expending, either not enough or too much, so it's a sort of superiority...that's Freud's explanation of that kind of thing...

Oh yes, something we haven't raised, um...I mean we may not get anywhere but...talking about finding things funny, I mean the classic thing is a joke, I mean we can laugh at jokes; does it, what does it mean to you to talk about jokes in relation to a film like this?

L16: I don't understand...

Q: Well...I mean in...Freud distinguishes between jokes and the comic, and in sort of everyday speech, the joke is something that somebody tells; one tells a joke to somebody, and they laugh...and there is a psychoanalytic model for how that joke is constructed because, actually one tells the joke to somebody who's, one would like to be sexually aggressive towards, someone who's not there; but because one can't do that that is displaced onto the joke, and one tells that to a third person, and that's the Freudian sort of model...telling a joke; can one actually talk in those terms...do you see what I mean? There is a difference between hearing somebody tell a joke, laughing or not laughing, and what's going on in a film, what's the kind of comic...

L16: You mean the visual, the visual joke and the one which is...

L13: It's much more, I think that film has much greater...I mean there's a, it's a two-way process, isn't it, someone can tell me a fairly indifferent joke and I will kind of laugh at it because...it will be kind of more infectiously funny, even though it actually isn't very funny...

Q: Well, I mean the structure is quite different, you're in a position where you hear something from somebody and you, you respond...and that structure can be still there in a film, in a sense, I mean...if you've got somebody telling a joke, you can respond to it, but is there, is there any other way in which in Monty Python for instance, in Meaning of Life, there might be things which make you laugh in the same way...

L16: Well, one...Michael Palin is talking at the end, you know, sitting in the, there's nothing visual, he's saying something, I didn't understand everything what he said, but it makes you laugh, I remember he was (?)...that's a kind of joke, OK we see him but there's no equivalent on the screen of the joke, you know, he is only saying something...or like when they are all like fishes inside the aquarium...

Q: Right...well perhaps, unless you've got any other...I've covered everything that...

L13: I'm not quite sure how this performed in the end but did it do as well as the other Python movies?

Q: I don't know actually...the impression I get is that it didn't, but that's only an impression...In fact I mean there are a couple of, there are a couple of books been written... (gap, section not recorded)...

yes, Let's get back to a bit of violence...

L13: Yes, series 2 of The Young Ones, in which, I can't remember now, the skinhead radical student, what's his name?

Q: Vivian...

L13: ...Vivian, yes, gets decapitated by a train, you know, his head falls off, kind of they kick his head around...when I

first saw it I just sort of rolled around laughing...I mean it's not as gruesome as some of this...but that's kind of completely unmotivated...I don't know, I've got very dubious unconscious motives (for liking that)...

Q: Well no, there's clearly an audience, I mean there is obviously an audience for that, and, I was looking at a book by David Morley called 'Family Television', and he did some interviews with families in Amer...in London, and there was clearly a sort of class distinction, although it wasn't a very big sample, he did detect, you know, that sort of class/income distinction, the people who did like or liked watching The Young Ones, which implied that there was, I mean you needed to have something that other people, you know, in lower income categories or education categories didn't have access to...or else it was a question of status...

L13: ...it was in the sort of Monty Python area, rather than...

Q: Well they were talking about The Young Ones...in particular...

L13: Yes, but...because that struck me as in a sense more down-market, as it were, aimed for a broader audience or something..

Q: Yes, but they noticed that...The young Ones, that...it was the ...C1's rather than the C2's and the D's...

L13: ...and Race as well actually, again that, I've shown that to a few people, who were really offended by some of it...I think Alexei Sayle does various sort of impersonations as a kind of, there's a bit with...

Q: ...South African...

L13: ...there's a South African one, there's, at the end, I mean Alexei Sayle does, in the last episode, does an impersonation of a Jewish landlord, he kind of comes in, he slashes up all the furniture, and charges them £200 (?)...and that sort of...I actually didn't, I mean I sort of laughed along with it, but I showed it to a couple of Jewish people, and they got kind of really, they were actually really pissed off by this, and it just hadn't really occurred to them at all...

Q: Well I think you've got, yes you've got other problems of what is racist and what, you know, who defines what racism is, I mean...you've got a hierarchy of whether it's OK to be racist about, about black people, and whether it's OK to be racist about Jews...politics comes into it very much there, doesn't it...

Right, shall we...wind up...

#### TAPE 5: L6,L22,L23

Q: ...generally and specifically...I've got a few particular points I'd like to raise, but I mean if we start off talking generally about the film, comedy, Monty Python...first of all some responses, I mean either...you haven't seen it before (L23), you didn't sound sure at the beginning, either, you know, first-time viewing or...your responses this time and, perhaps, about the first time you saw it as well...

L22: I think I found it slightly funnier the first time I saw it.

Q: When was that?

L22: When it first came out. '83? But I remember not ceasing myself laughing the first time round...and I found some of the sections funnier than others...I found the first section

funniest (Crimson Permanent Assurance)

L6: Yes I definitely thought it was funnier when I saw it the first time; I think I remembered the...the Mr Creosote sketch really did crease me when I saw it at the cinema, but I mean that's, it's one of those things that you can only laugh like that when you see it the first time; the second time you know what's happening, so it's not so funny...but, looking at it now, you know when I saw it at the time I didn't know what I thought about it, but I think it's definitely one of their, it's actually almost a serious film, for them...

Q: Ah...yes.

L6: 'cos you know, they are, they weren't just trying to be funny ... (?) but I don't think they were trying to be, you know, literally hysterical; I think they were trying to be a bit more contem...you know, contemplating things...

Q: Yes, yes...what were your first responses?

L23: Well, I don't think I'd have gone to see it voluntarily...I wasn't very keen on the thing...I found the section with schooling, I think, the nearest thing to reasonably funny; the others funny in patches but as a whole I can't say I liked the film!

Q: Yes...I haven't looked at the questionnaires, but what did you put about Monty Python?

L23: Well I had seen the first couple of original series, I think, yes the first two series, then I sort of missed after that, I just found it increasingly unfunny...and I think I've seen two or three of the films you mentioned, (?) but...Time Bandits I think you had down...so I have seen some of their films but, but this one I didn't really get on with, I mean all the, like the Mr Creosote sketch, and Live Donations I just find that sort of gore overwhelms any humour in it... there's...the impact or the shock of the idea that if you've got a kidney card then someone's going to come and take your kidneys, that initial thing's sort of fairly funny but then I find all the spurting tomato ketchup gets a bit overwhelming!

L6: Yes, I agree, yes.

Q: Perhaps we can come back to that in a minute; I mean the point that both of you raised in different ways about the fact that the film is maybe less funny, or deliberately funny, perhaps, than the television series...when you were filling in the thing during the film, I mean, was that a difficulty, the very question, is it, how funny is it?

L6: I think what's difficult about the question is sort of, you can actually say as you go through the film, well I found that bit funnier than the bit I saw before, but I put '2' for that and I don't think it's unfunny so I've got to put '2' again...

L22: The grading in your own mind is quite difficult...

L23: Probably easier to do it in retrospect...(agreement)...

L6: ...although I suppose your mood can be altered by what you've seen before, because you might be a bit more receptive after, you know if you really enjoyed the beginning, it might sort of draw you in more...

Q: That's right; I think also that, I mean this should come through now, in a way, that what's obviously missing in a sort of thing like that is the fact that within one section you might actually find one thing really hilarious, that lasts

for two minutes, and the rest of it not very funny, and that doesn't necessarily come through there...What I was actually getting at as well was a point several people have made, about, somebody said that the...the first section, the Crimson Permanent Assurance, they didn't find at all funny but they really enjoyed it; does that make sense...

L23: Yes, 'cos again there was sort of incongruity which was amusing to start with but it sort of gets a bit laboured after a while; the idea of fighting with office stamps, and things like that...

L6: It's very...sort of ingenious, but you know the ideas were very ingenious, that they used the mundane office equipment and made it look like weapons of slavery or piratical weapons but it sort of, it didn't make it extremely funny, you sort of laughed at it...ingenuity...

L22: I found, I think, on that point, I also found it funny because of the kind of genre that it's sending up, and I'm thinking of Burt Lancaster and swashbuckling and all of that; and little visual gags within it make me laugh, I mean the fact that the guy who'd got his bicycle chained to the side of the building is desperately trying to unpadlock it while kind of the building pulls away...that makes me laugh...

Q: Yes...I mean that makes you laugh, but I mean the point somebody else was making was that they enjoyed things, I mean,

L22: ...right...right.

Q: this is the distinction, it's a problem, distinguishing things that one likes and enjoys from things that one, that are funny...I mean is there a...can we say some more about what that problem could be...because as you said (L6) in a way the film is not out and out comedy, and yet one can enjoy other things...

L5: Well I mean I think you, you...if you look at the film as a whole you can say I didn't find it that funny but I did enjoy it; and I mean for me, when I say funny I mean that I laughed at it; and when I saw something spontaneous, it caused me to laugh, whereas just because you didn't laugh didn't mean that you didn't enjoy it, which, you know I think I did enjoy watching it.

L23: I'd say the opposite, I didn't enjoy the film, but bits of it were funny...sort of a reverse thing...

Q: That's interesting; I mean, I'll put it specifically to you, (L23), one of the things that people said they enjoyed was the pleasure of say the performances in some places, you know like recognizing sort of John Cleese and...that's actually pleasurable, perhaps...

L23: Yes...and I would have said the same for the aspects of incongruity; surreal parts of it, I'm not sure, but I found the sort of overwhelming tenor of the gore and the puking and so on, just sort of overwhelmed by it...

L6: I think also something that distinguishes Monty Python, from television to cinema, is that...that was directed by Terry Gilliam, wasn't it?...I mean he's got, he's a very sort of powerful film director, he makes things very watchable, and that's where sort of I think that films sort of built on the television series sort of <sup>powerful</sup> in some ways surpass them because of that visual filmic skill that comes through...

L23: It was harking back all the time to the television format,

wasn't it, all the graphics and things...

L6: Some of it, but you tend to get these in most of the sort of sketch-like Monty Python films, which that was a return to, whereas (?) had sort of stories...

Q: You're talking about production values as well...there's more care...

L6: ...and more money...

Q: ...paid to, yes, the visual look of the whole thing, yes...

L6: But actually, I think when you were talking about characteristics of Monty Python, I think in the end that...that scene with the fish thing, when they were talking about 'where's the fish?', spot the fish, I mean that was the, almost sort of, that's the sort of Monty Python that I remember from the television series, and yet it was, I almost found it, I just thought it was rubbish...I didn't, you know, I mean that wasn't something, I hadn't thought about that in terms of the television programmes before, but you know, it almost seemed to me to be very schoolboyish sort of humour, and I didn't really like that bit at all, it wasn't very good...

Q: Yes, what did anybody else think of that particular sequence? Because it does stand out a bit in terms of the rest of the film...

L23: I can't remember it...

Q: 'I wonder where the fish has gone'...

L6: Yes, and they had the long arms, and...

L23: Oh, yes, that was one of my complete score zeros...

L6: ...that's what I thought...

L22: Yes.

L6: Graham Chapman in his suspenders and bustle...

Q: I, I mean I see, I know exactly what you mean, that it came nearest to being the surreal dada type stuff of some of the television, but it, at the same time was quite different... the other thing of course that's missing is the animation, except for the title credit sequence...

L6: But there's the trees bit as well...

Q: The trees...that's right, yes...

L6: There are bits...

L23: This whole thing of the office building turning into a ship, I mean that all seems to relate to it, it's not actually animated but...(agreement)

L6: Instead of having to be confined to paper they could...again, because of production values...

L23: ...big models...

Q: Umm...can we go back to what you raised (L23) about the, as you say the gore and the guts and the puking and everything, um, I wasn't watching you personally, but I mean most people and at least some of you nevertheless did laugh when that comes on; most people, at least, whether they like it or not, do respond, by laughing, to a sequence like Mr Creosote; I mean do you, as I say, I wasn't looking or anything, but you don't feel you did at all, (L23)...

L23: Well, the...as I say, again, the initial incongruity of someone coming into a plush-looking restaurant and saying things like

'fuck off I'm full'; I found that amusing (General quiet laughter), but the idea of people becoming covered in vomit just didn't get to me at all; and in the, again in the Live Organs, as I say, the initial idea, extremely funny, you know, you get one of these cards from the library and then the squad might descend on you, but I don't want to see the detail of it...

L6: I think that was a really...badly...a bad scene, about that, not a bad scene! I mean the scene was bad, just the way that was handled and everything...as much as I quite often tend to laugh at those things, I didn't for that one...

Q: ...the Live Organ Transplant...

L6: yes, the Live Organ Transplant, I think, I think it was very, it was quite unfunny and there was an idea there and yet it hadn't, it wasn't very well developed or very well executed; and the idea of that, he went down to the library and, and they, they were straight after him, you didn't really, that didn't really come across very well, I don't think; I actually sort of...that's the nearest I think I got to thinking, well that's very gratuitous, and I don't normally think that often that violence is that gratuitous when I see it, but I did actually in that scene, I thought well what's the point, you know?

Q: Yes I mean what I'm getting at is that whether it's gratuitous or not, strictly speaking, I think the response often is still to, there's a kind of shock, there's a laughter of shock perhaps...

L23: I think also, I'm sure it's deliberate 'cos you know in the end, when he's saying what people want to see in the cinema these days is people with chainsaws cutting people up, so... I'm sure that was part of it...

L22: Yes, yes...I think what you were saying, I think goes for a lot of the sketches, the initial idea for me is very funny, but a lot of the rest of it is kind of surplus to requirement, it's not actually needed to make me laugh, though I can find it enjoyable...

L23: I found that when I stopped watching ~~Mythen~~ on TV, you know the first two series seemed to have a lot of original funny stuff in, then I found you'd get one or two good jokes, and very thinly spread...

L22: The premises are very very funny...

Q: Is that...could that also be to do with, I mean another question, another type of question, could that also be to do with getting used to that type of humour...

L23: I don't think so...I think it did change in character, I mean, 'cos I remember, as I say there seemed to be a clear difference in my mind between the first and second series, where it all seemed very new, and then it just seemed to be, they had the same characters each time, and you're expected to find funny them doing the same thing. Find it hard to articulate...they seemed to sort of latch onto a catch-phrase each programme, and spend sort of quarter of an hour working through that, and it just didn't seem to have the appeal of the earlier work...

Q: ...and you felt the early programmes <sup>maybe</sup> weren't doing that, yes, they weren't actually...

L23: I suppose, it could be, as you say, it was just it seemed new

at the time, but I think there genuinely was more variety of stuff in the earlier series...

Q: There's...I mean that raises another sort of thing; there are two types of, I think I mentioned this maybe in the course, I can't remember, two types of pleasure, two kinds of comedy, one is the pleasure of repetition, and the other's the pleasure of something new...which I suppose can conflict...in a sense what you're referring to there is the pleasure of the new, I mean you know, it's refreshingly new at the beginning,

L23: ...I suppose so, yes...

Q: ...whereas, and other people may take some pleasure, or have taken pleasure in Meaning of Life from the recognition of something that's familiar, the performance.

L22: Also within the film, what I found enjoyable and pleasurable but not funny was the beginning of one scene leading in from the, on from the end of another one, I mean the Heaven sequence where they in fact...go, they arrive, all these people who die from the salmon mousse arrive in heaven, and the people in front of them in the queue are people from a previous sketch...

Q: Yes, which is a nice idea...

L22: Yes, which is ingenious but not necessarily funny.

L6: That question of sort of recognition...just sort of...you do tend to know the characters so well that one almost doesn't, you know, think about that, or I didn't think about that, I just (knew) what they're like, and I didn't gain any extra pleasure from seeing the same sort of characterisations again...they were just them...so I didn't, it didn't automatically spring to mind...

Q: Umm, it does seem that all three of you, or the general impression I get, is that the first section or the section on Birth, sex education and so on was the funniest...for all of you? or...

L6: Yes it was for me, the first sketch, the Birth one, in the hospital, I really liked that one, I thought it was very good; that had sort of all the good ingredients, sort of irreverence, the way they (?)...and just the way they sort of ridiculed the system, the hospital sort of system, and doctors and the Establishment...That had sort of, it had all the bits of ingredients, you know like it had a little bit of gore with the baby, then it was all, you know, not too much, but it was just right, just a good mixture of things...just appealed to me I think...

Q: But it...has it also got something to do, to be...provocative! has it also got something to do with the fact that the first section, broadly speaking, is to do with sex? Childbirth, then 'Every Sperm is Sacred', the Protestant talking about sex for pleasure...

L22: ...the fact that we find it funny...

Q: ...sex education...yes. Or is it other things to do with writing, timing...

L6: I think...I mean the sex does tend to be, it always brings laughs, and it always is...funny but I think that within just that section I mean I enjoyed the Birth one which I think is less, was less sex-related than the other sections but I mean it was, the other sections were still slightly funnier than



than the rest of the film...I think sex is so much a part of comedy that, that you can have a sort of bad sexually-oriented sketch, and you might laugh at it; but I mean you know, it's just another aspect of humour, just because it's sex doesn't make it any more taboo or any more funny...any more, anyway, I think...because it's, it's been dealt with over quite a lot of things...

Q: Let's come back to that in a second...how do you (L22/23) respond to what I've just said?

L6: Me?

Q: No the others, I'm sorry...

L22: I suppose, yes...I suppose I'm partly laughing at that and pa...again, in the 'Every Sperm is Sacred', I'm thinking of Oliver and I'm thinking of the musical genre, laughing at the sending-up of that...as well...That's predominantly why I found it funny; the fact that they're singing 'Every Sperm is Sacred'...(?)...

Q: What about the religious aspect of...

L23: Oh...any poking at religion is always good for a laugh with me! (laughter) I think also, I can't remember, what came after the school scene?...go into...

Q: It goes into the rugby...rugby game and then the lecture by Graham Chapman, a brief lecture about the need for an army, and then the sergeant-major marching up and down...

L23: Right...cos I think, for me, sort of after that, you started getting the bits I found objectionable, like the Live Organs...

Q: ...and then the Zulu war...

L23: And then there's what?

Q: And then the Zulu war.

L23: Oh that's right, yes, that was...a bit of history; I think, for me, you were saying, why do we find the earlier parts funny, for me, it would be having to have the unpleasant part, so it was just more pleasurable...though it was funny...

Q: So you would, you would say the...the blood and gore and guts part literally sort of put you off...

L23: Yes...I think so...If that had happened in the earliest, in the first scene, that would of coloured my view of the entire film!

Q: Yes, yes. Let's come back to, I mean, something that you just said, (L6), that struck me; you said...I can't remember your words, but first of all you said well sex usually manages to raise a laugh, you said something like that...used very often..

L6: Mm...yes, I contradicted myself...(laughs)...

Q: ...yes...and then you also said that well, yes it's a very common subject in humour, in comedy, so because it's so everyday and common, it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be funny...

L6: Yes, yes, what I meant was...

Q: ...seems to contradict...

L6: Yes, it does slightly, but...I'll try and clarify that, say I'm a politician now...(laughter)...what I meant was, was that quite often sex is dealt with in comedy and sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's not, but just the fact that it's sex

doesn't mean that it's necessarily funny...

Q: Doesn't mean it's necessarily funny...

L6: yes...that is the fact that it's being raised doesn't mean it's necessarily funny, which I think was the point you were, you were trying to say that you thought that, maybe that people do react in that way...

Q: ...which you, you did seem to imply yourself when you said that if you deal with sex then it usually...

L6: Yes...I mean, so probably it's more likely to be...dealt humorously with, but I mean like, say, for example, Benny Hill, I mean, you know, everything is supposed to, is more or less, most of his comedy is based on sex, but I would sit there and watch it and I wouldn't laugh at all...

Q: ...which raises the question of audience, of course...What, if we could sort of take a detour, what sort of audience do you think, how do you think of the audience of Monty Python? in general...

L6: I think it's youth oriented, sort of...(?) probably up to about...thirty, maybe more, you can't sort of generalize totally but I mean quite often students or...it's student sort of humour...

Q: Do you think...is it that now? or...has it changed with time?

L23: 'Cos presumably it's people who were in that category when the first things came out and have been following it since...

L6: Yes, that's right, that's right so I mean obviously you know there are people who've grown up with...(?)...But I think that would be...you won't get people liking it who, who didn't like it first time, I don't think you'll find people, as they get older, deciding they like it, it's going to be the other way round, it'll appeal to, it'll have younger people, appealing, enjoying that sort of humour...

L22: ...for the first time...

L6: Yes, first time, rather than, so it's, you know, be perennially for young people, sort of comedy with...

Q: Yes; although of course now we've got The Young Ones,(?)... and all that...

L6: ...whether they're doing anything radically different is... not really, I don't think...

Q: Not radically different, in the sense that because it's, it's...

L6: ...it's just a continuation...

Q: ...in the same sort of strand; maybe young people having seen Comic Strip and The Young Ones might see Monty Python and say oh well, you know, it's just the same sort of stuff only old-fashioned...

Umm...yes. Let's come back to this thing about sex! Because I still want to pursue it a little bit further, in the sense that just mentioning, I mean do you feel, taking into account the discussion of audience and who's watching, do you feel that sometimes just mentioning 'penis' or whatever would raise a laugh? Do you think it happens in this film? Does it happen elsewhere? For whom...

L23: I don't think so...I think, you were talking about Benny Hill but in, going back into older films, you know Carry On films or whatever, and you mentioned dropped trousers or anything

like that, and that's it, a laugh lined up (?)...but I think in these jaded days it's not so automatic...

Q: You think it used to be more the case than it is now...

L23: Yes, just because it was more of a taboo area...so I don't think it would automatically (?) today...

L6: I think it depends who says it, as well, I mean,,,if you get, you know like a film, you sort of expect it in a film like Monty Python, you know any film like that...that there will be mention of 'penis' or, or 'fuck' or whatever; but if somebody who you don't expect to say a word like that says it, then it can be funny; I think it's expectation as well. Or for example Jools Holland makes his "groovy fucker" cock-up on, you know, on kids' television; I mean, you find that funny, and also in a way radical because like you're breaking the mould by saying it...

Q: Where it, again you've got to a mixture between funny and other kinds of pleasure...

L6: Yes..that's right.

Q: Yes...yes. When...we haven't really answered that question sort of comprehensively, but another thing that goes with that,

L6: (?)...

Q: ...I dare say it's impossible! (laughter)...but what goes with that is that obviously sometimes, then, another word for it would be smut, might be funny, but then how much comedy does smut need to carry with it for it to be funny? When does... how little comedy is necessary for it to be funny? Have you heard the Derek and Clive, you know Derek and Cleve stuff?

L6: Mm yes...

Q: That was Peter Cook and Dudley Moore doing their Pete and Dud sketches, doing their Pete and Dud characterisations; they had a few drinks...it became extremely crude; I toyed with the idea of using that sort of as part of this, as well, to see how far people would accept that they go with just being really 'crude', not really a good word, but...and the comedy part tends to sort of recede and disappear, and in the end it's just sort of sexual abuse, and is it funny any more? and for whom...

L23: From what I can remember...the humour in it, for me, wasn't the sexual aspect, it was other things; the only sketch I can remember is, they're two football supporters saying "Do you know I saw Nobby the other day, and he called me a fucking cunt" "No! Fucking cunt! So what did you do?" "Oh I called him a fucking cunt!" "Quite right"...

Q: ...and it goes on...

L23:..and it was just they were showing, all that showed was like the impoverishment of language when people just sort of say that the whole time, and it's not, I don't think it's the sort of the sexual aspect that's coming out there...I can't remember what the other sketches on that one were...

L22: But also I mean there's this sense in which Monty Python is sending up that aspect; it says 'penis' and 'fuck'; it's not saying it in the spirit with which some of the people who say it find it funny...

Q: Yes, yes...I think that's right...

L6: Yes, if you sort of go back to the school sketch, I mean if

you think about it it...the way they were discussing things, I mean it...it wasn't exactly meant to be humorous, I mean it was all, almost, the way I saw it anyway, is that they were saying well you know here you have a school lesson to talk, supposed to talk about sex education and they don't actually talk about sex; I think it was trying to make a point, that, you know, how ludicrous sex education is and how ludicrous this British sort of-ness of pompous Brits, as Death said later on, you know, that, you know, that we're, British people are just so afraid of sex, and it is so taboo, and it can't be discussed, you know I mean like, I always think that's quite a serious sketch, because it's saying that, you know, we can't even educate our children in sexual...sexuality...

Q: ...and it's also, yes, the peculiar thing is that it's clearly, that particular sketch clearly is also meant to be funny...

L6: Yes, yes...it is...

Q: ...so it's doing both at the same time...

L6: ...yes, that's right, but...it's better that it is...

Q: So...in the beginning of the Mr Creosote sequence when Eric Idle sings the Penis Song, what, what is the laughter at the beginning of that...because I noticed that with almost every group that's done this, as soon as, you know, he's there, "Isn't it nice to have a penis...", there is laughter, immediately; so where does that come from?

L6: Well I think it's, well obviously he's trying to do Noel Coward, so...part of it is the idea of Noel Coward singing that, and...and almost, you could almost imagine him singing it, if he was perhaps alive today, I don't know...

Q: ...if he was doing a Derek and Clive...(laughter)...

L6: ...and so...part of it would be that, sort of the character that you recognize, that you don't hear in that situation, doing that; and...

L23: I think most of the humour is over the audience's reaction, 'Oh, what a witty song!'...not thinking about it at all, it's just like, another one.

L6: I think there's something more to that, actually, as well, that again is saying something about...I can't really place it, but it's something like that the British are so sort of I don't know obliiv either oblivious or...of that they, yes, I think it's a matter that they don't understand subtleties, you know, and that they were trying, obviously that wasn't subtle, but that's what it was trying to say, that if, if you said something to...if you said something or if you sung something that was subtly irreverent, quite often a lot of people wouldn't sort of understand what was going on...I don't think I've put that very well but there's something about that that, I think there was more to it than just...

L22: It's, I mean it's also to do with anything to retain the, you know, retain the status quo, isn't it,...

L6: Yes, that's it,....yes, yes...

L22: ...so even if they have understood, they pretend they didn't; you know what I mean...pretend they haven't understood, and everything was really all right and this is Noel Coward singing a (?) sophisticated song...

Q: ...which is what that...that table that leaves during the meal is doing in a sense,...

L22: Yes, yes, exactly...(agreement)...

Q: 'The meal was fine, yes' (laughter)

L6: Yes, that's right...

Q: ...and the response when she says "I'm having my period"... So...something that's related to that, umm...laughing at, well, our attitudes to sex...can we, under what circumstances do we laugh at or find funny things which we might object to, in theory? Issues such as racism or sexism or...things that we think, oh, I don't really want to find that funny...I shouldn't be laughing at that...either in The Meaning of Life or elsewhere; clearly there are times when, you know, I've heard a racist joke or something and...I don't want to hear this!... but having heard it sort of smile and think, yes, I suppose it's quite clever. Does this film do that at all? or...

L22: There's a, there's a moment just after the Zulu wars, where a guy walks on in a Zulu suit, unzips it and it is in fact an immaculate white guy in a suit, and then speaks with a, with an African accent; which I didn't think was funny, but I think like you, it even crossed my mind, as regards you to that scene, that maybe I shouldn't be laughing at it...but I found it quite inge...again, ingenious, clever. But not necessarily funny, I don't think I did find it funny...actually...

L6: There's also the, there's the guy who's sentenced to death for being gratuitously sexist, and there was the woman who's talking about leaving the British Museum and working for a dirty Jew, and then he poured the bucket of sick over her head...

Q: She didn't say dirty Jew...

L6: ...(?)...it's all right, I can say it, 'cos I'm Jewish!... (laughter)...working for a Jew, sorry, I didn't mean to be bad shit, it's the dirty vomit compared to...so obviously they were trying to say something about it, but...they were trying to bring in something to do with racism, sexism, within the humour and maybe, they were almost maybe making a statement that, you know, because they were saying that, even though they were stooping to the levels of racism and sexism, they were saying that it was maybe slightly wrong... 'cos, because they poured a bucket of vomit over her head and because the guy who jumped, who had been convicted had to jump off the cliff, you know...

L23: Do you think having...

L6: ...but that doesn't mean that they're not exploiting it...

L23: Yes, having said that this guy was guilty of the making of a gratuitously sexist joke, like it then gives them the excuse to have shots of women, boobs flying all over the place, so perhaps that's giving them licence to do that, kind of, if they hadn't had that beforehand, you'd think mm, nasty sexist imagery, but (?) because he's chosen it as his punishment, so

Q: On the one hand, as L6 says, it still is, but then is it necessarily, because I mean in a sense if they say that, it does mean something...it complicates the issue, certainly, in one's response to it.

L23: There's always this thing with Monty Python as well that many of the major women characters are in fact, I'm not sure which two it is in drag, I'm sure that's something, says something to do with their sexist attitudes...

- L6: Maybe they like dressing up in women's clothes...says more about their sexual attitudes maybe than their sexist ones... especially Graham Chapman, I think! (laughter)
- Q: There's a lovely quote...I don't have to say this, but I mean there's an interview with Graham Chapman where he says something like 'I'm sure that boys and girls, there's no such thing as boys and girls, there aren't only two sexes, only two genders or two sexes, everybody should be able to choose which gender or sex they want to be'...he goes over the top a bit about that...everybody can choose whether they want to be male or female...
- L23: That gets thrown in in the hospital sketch, doesn't it, when she has the baby, is it a boy or a girl?...don't impose your roles on it now! (laughter)
- L6: Yes, that's quite good...
- Q: But that, that's an interesting point, though, I mean whether it is sexism or not...it's interesting that you said that it is sexist; because some people have argued that the fact that it is...I mean, there's another question, is the fact that there are just six men working together and obviously some sketches with women in have to occur...
- L23: Well there used to be...on the TV series you used to have, the only real woman in it was Carol Cleveland, who'd sort of come on as a dumb pin-up type, the only other women in it were these people in drag, I remember there was a lot of controversy with the first series that the images of women were all highly dubious...
- Q: What some people suggested is that the fact that it is men in drag playing women and not women themselves actually changes the meaning of it...
- L23: So it's all right for men in drag to portray women as stupid and ugly and...
- Q: Well...I don't know if people say well it's all right to, but it certainly makes the argument more complicated than if it simply was a woman being vomited over, for instance...
- L23: Deconstructing stereotypes...yes.
- L6: But also, I think, it's also this British, I mean like Britishness is...you know really central as well; because they're always, they're always ridiculing the upper classes and yet they, they are, they come from that sort of well-educated system and they're ridiculing it, and they seem to even in ridiculing it they seem to adopt the same sort of attitudes, sexual attitudes that they, that that system represents, like what we see in Personal Services, you know, we all know about, you know sort of judges in drag all the time, and it's just they just still in a way continuing that because...they just found another outlet, because they can do it on telly instead; but yet they're still, they're trying to ridicule it as well, but they're reinforcing it as well.
- Q: But then yes, given their, their background and their origins, it's impossible to expect them to do anything else, having been through Oxford and Cambridge...what can one expect, there are limitations to the type of humour they can produce...There are a couple of people in the other groups who said that well they they found that they didn't find it disturbing, women have said...in groups have said that they didn't actually find it disturbing...the gender stereotypes being portrayed...

Let's just have a look and see if there's anything else... We've covered most of the things I wanted to talk about. Oh yes, I mean what...I was going to just ask you about, I mean what effect do you think watching it here in this context has in relation to happening to, happening to, say it was on television it was on, with somebody else, you happened to see it again, planned to go and see it at the cinema or...

L6: I think it does affect...watching it here with, I mean, obviously we don't know each other very well so sometimes that does affect how you, you know you react to something, I think always when people are in an audience, if somebody laughs they may be more likely to laugh as well...

L22: It's also the fact that something is expected of you...  
(short gap)

L6: ...yes, you're thinking about the, what's going on on the screen in terms of maybe what you may be asked later, so it, that's not necessarily different to, 'cos I always, when I'm watching things anyway, think about what's going on...but I think perhaps where it's more affected is, say if you're sitting in a cinema you can sit with strangers because of the darkness and because you're anonymous, and so you can react the way you want to, whereas if you're sitting in a room with some other people that you don't know very well, you may actually feel, you know, that it's difficult to laugh, or to be the first to laugh, in case other people don't find it funny...

Q: I think that's right, yes...And the fact that it's part of a sort of experiment, yes...

L23: I think we're mature enough to let that not affect our viewing skills!

Q: Well...

L22: I don't know...I think it does, in some way; I don't know if it affects my viewing skills, but it affects me as a viewer of the film rather than, I know it would be different if I was sitting at home watching it.

Q: It may not affect what you think of the film, but it may affect how you respond to it, which may be something different. And I'm not sure, in a sense, you know I'm interested in both, I suppose...

L23: I think the only thing for me, as I said earlier, I wouldn't have seen it! (laughs)...under voluntary circumstances...

L6: I think that's something about humour as well, that you can, you know certain people, you know it's just you know, taste in humour, certain people like certain things and not others; but also if you're in a peer group, you know that you're all in tune to what your humour is, so there are things that you can work off each other, but if you're, if you're just with people that you don't know very well, sometimes things that would be funny somewhere else just don't, don't work, because of people's attitudes towards humour or...

Q: There was somebody, I think...it was (L13) who was on the course as well, he said the first time he saw it, he went with somebody, no he didn't, he saw it with his father, and he said, oh, you ought to see this, I don't know why he said that, but anyway, (laughter)...'this is good, let's watch this' and, and after a while he started feeling quite embarrassed...why did I suggest watching this?, you know, and it really inhibited him; and he said that watching it the second time here, he actually

enjoyed it more, because even though he'd seen it before, it was, he actually felt it as being a more (?) situation...

L23: ...freedom!

Q: ...so it's a comparative thing, isn't it, how free it is compared with other situations...

L23: I've quite often experienced that as well when I've press-ganged someone into going to see a film which I really like, and you come out afterwards and they say oh, what's the fuss about?! and you're sort of sitting there trying to defend it...

Q: Right...if there's nothing else, of burning importance...

TAPE 6: L5.L12.L14

Q: I've got a few specific points that, you know, I'd like to get through, but we can start off just talking about general impressions...what you liked, what you didn't like, what...any particularly strong initial impressions...

L5: I hadn't seen the film before...I'd heard about the sketch at the end, the second to last sketch, sorry, the expanding man who blows up, and that was very funny, but I thought a lot of the other stuff was moderately...funny, almost disappointing, from what I was perhaps expecting.

Q: I noticed a lot of hilarity, I mean, did you all find that was the funniest sketch? sketch, well the funniest part...

L12: No, I didn't think that was the funniest...

L14: Well you laugh because you're shocked...

L12: ...well it was so revolting, it was that...you know, you don't even like to look at it, for fear of...

L5: ...how do you measure, I mean maybe that was funny, we laughed a lot, but to measure the humour of laughter, how...

L12: Well I don't know how you measure humour...

L5: yes...interest (?)...

L12: I mean I think that's a very hard thing, to actually ring a number on that anyway, because it's very actually hard to, to recognize in yourself what you particularly find funny; we don't tend to stop and analyse humour...I mean I thought it was very funny but I thought it was quite revolting, it was a kind of horror, it was a kind of mixture of 'yeucch' dread and I actually felt quite nauseous at one point...

L14: ...yes...

L12: ...and I thought if he pukes again I really, I can't look because it's making me want to vomit actually (others agreeing) ...not strongly, but I started to feel a bit nauseous...

Q: But that didn't stop you laughing.

L12: No, but it was laughing at the horror, it was the horrific kind of revoltingness...

L5: ...I wouldn't say it was horror, I mean it was, it was, it was too, it was too...

L12: ...well you know, the revoltingness of it...

L5: ...it was sort of revolting, there was some suggestions (?)... it was very funny...his whole body (?)...I mean I think that that sort of deflated that, the horror of the vomit, quite a



lot; I thought actually it was funny...

Q: What...you'd seen it before...did you...

L14: Yes...I dreaded that bit...because I remember when I first saw it in the cinema, I remember the whole cinema going (vomit sound) (laughter)...because it's so horrible! It's revolting, it is!

L5: it's funny...we sound even worse! (laughter continuing)

L12: Yes but it's revolting at the same time...

L14: I think, I think it is a defensive type of laughter at that one

L12: ...yes, yes...

Q: ...for instance it's interesting that I mean you three did respond much more actively to that, I mean you were laughing and...the other groups that have been here, sort of didn't respond to it all that much, I'm not sure why...

L5: I think there's a lot of that sort of humour around now, with peop...or just the past couple of years, I think it's dropping off lately, but with the, you know The Young Ones and...humour centred around sort of, I don't know how to describe it, graphic slapstick, shall we say,

L12: ...bodies...

L5: ...body functions...

Q: ...Filthy Rich and Catflap...

L5: ...and...well, and previous to that The Young Ones, and Ben Elton on his stand-up routines, you know, he's done something, he did an amazing routine on Saturday Night Live a couple of months ago on, talking about women's periods, talking about periods, which was quite, I mean I was shocked, I mean I shouldn't have been, I'm ideologically sound, I shouldn't have been, but...and he was really drilling it home...

L12: what because someone could talk about that on television...

L5: Yes...I know, I know the whole purpose, the whole purpose of...

L12: and you're making into a comedy sketch...

L5: yes, no, I was shocked because I wasn't expecting, I'd like to think I was shocked because I wasn't expecting even Ben Elton to do it here, on television; you know, if I go to a cabaret say in London, it's on Saturday night, I wouldn't be so shocked...but I think to actually see it on the screen, was quite surprising. I like to think that maybe I was shocked for the reasons you suggest...

Q: Yes, that idea of surprise or shock...did that operate at all, that, I noticed you were quite, the early scenes about sex education and the Sperm Song; how did they go?

L12: Well I thought, I mean I liked that first bit, not the very first bit, which I didn't think was very funny but the bit about the birth and all that bit, but when I saw the Sperm Song I realized I'd seen it, I haven't seen the film before but I realized I'd seen it reviewed on Barry Norman's Film<sup>80</sup> whatever, eighty-three I suppose, and as I say I remembered (?)...because I remember watching it...laughing at that, but it's, it's the lack of, you know again it's the shock factor, isn't it, people singing 'Every Sperm is Precious' and all this...and I liked the, I liked the sex education lesson one as well...and I think they poke fun very well at the school institution, they're

particularly good at that, and in the church; I thought that was very funny as well...

L5: It seems like a very...I don't know how (?) a thing it is to say, but I feel that the sort of school that they're using for that scene is more to do with the sort of school they went to...

L12: Oh very much so...very much so...(L14 agreeing)

L5: ...rather than anything else.

L12: But I felt, I liked, I thought that was quite funny, that 'Every Sperm is Precious' but it was just the parody was very clever as well, it was like Oliver wasn't it...streets and everything; but I think the thing is with, when you've seen a lot of Monty Python stuff, it's very kind of self-reflective, 'cos you tend to get, you tend to recognize the pattern of humour that you're going into, and I was conscious that I was, at points I was thinking, am I laughing because this is funny, or am I laughing because it reminds me of...I mean, John Cleese as a waiter, or in fact in the trenches, where he's kind of you know, 'that fucking (?)', it was just like that waiter sketch, you know, you know where he comes in with the meat cleaver and says, 'How dare you be rude about our food!' and I thought, because they so easily go into kind of parodies of characters they've done before; what you tend to do is recognize that, and laugh because it sets off something you recognize, that you laughed at before; and therefore I think it's harder to find things that are new to laugh at, I mean I was a little bit disappointed, I didn't think it was hilariously funny...I didn't ring the...top...

Q: ...what was missing from...

L12: ...well I don't know really, I mean I didn't laugh as much as I did when I first saw Monty Python, but a lot's changed, you know, and I think your points were unfair, Ian...(L5)...sorry; which is that I think that because they set the whole thing off really, in 1970, '69, whenever it was, that they just set a whole new trend, and therefore now you've had all what's come since, and recently there's like The Young Ones, that, with you know with milkmen wandering around with cleavers in their heads and...

L5: ...I think...

L12: ...Filthy Rich and Catflap, that sort of thing, therefore you, if when you go back to this sort of humour it doesn't have the shock-value it had originally...so it is dulled a bit, certainly

L5: I think it's also, it's passé really...

L12: ...well that's what I'm saying, (?)...

L5: ...Monty Python, almost...I felt very passé...I remember watch:, yes...I remember watching it when I was young, it was like, almost like a treat, but it was quite a naughty thing to watch, 'cos it was on so late Sunday nights as I remember it, when it first started...I used, I was only about nine or ten at the time, or even eleven, I can't remember, but...and it was, please, can I stay up late, used to have to beg to be allowed to watch it, because my big brother watched it...and it was really funny then and I went through, I went through the grammar schools as it happens, and it was very funny; all through school, kids learning sketches off by heart, the parrot sketch; and it was very funny! But it, it...it certainly seemed, they didn't seem to have moved on at all, they seemed to be, I think as you've implied, right, using past glories, sort of trying to push...

L12: No I think they have moved on in other ways, because...I mean like Brazil...

L5: ...yes...there's the Python team on...as...yes

L12: Brazil ...separately...has done (L12 and L5 both speaking here). But when they come together they tend to wallow in what was the time...

L5: ...what seems to be...past, yes...

L12: ...and that's understandable, you know...

L14: But the Goons never moved on, did they, and yet people still find them funny...

L5: That's just institutionalised humour, that's all...to a big extent I think Monty Python is to a certain extent these days; that doesn't detract from how effective it has been; but I think it's institutionalised a lot...and...it's reasonable, there's still funny stuff in that...

L12: Did you wat...did you used to listen to the Goons? when you were younger?

L14: No I didn't, no, I came to that later on...so for I mean that had already become received as the comedy canon, if you like, by the time I got it...

L12: ...it's a question of what becomes a pattern, I think...

L14: ...but I still found it funny, even though I'd heard other things before that that in fact followed on from the Goons as the following sort of grew larger...but you see all humour is going to be institutionalised, isn't it...

L5: Some more than others...

L12: ...yes...very quickly institutionalised actually...

L5: ...that's why, yes, that's why it's, that's where The Young Ones and that sort of humour seems to be...I think another series of that ilk would be boring...

L12: ...and even that was starting to bore me, I felt it was (?)...

L5: ...totally and utterly boring...

L12: ...because you could see the jokes coming...

L5: ...you could see the joke, yes, and it was very...Filthy Rich and Catflap was very, was very specific in its humour, you know, it was trying to...(?) parodying you know the TV personality, you know, really the whole thing was about that, it was a very small area of humour...

L14: I was reminded of that song with Flanders and Swan, with the rude words in it, you know "pee-po, belly-bum draws"...and they'd sing...

L12: ...from this?

L14: No no this was years ago, this was one of Rich...

L12: ...oh from Filthy Rich and Catflap...

L14: Oh no, no, Flanders and Swan were...

L12: No I mean what were you, what reminded you of it?

L14: Oh, sorry,,yes, well the, the idea of the shockingness of certain subject-matter...this has always been around, that if they depend on the shockingness of the certain subject matter, sure, once it's been expressed, once someone's dared to say it, that's taken away all the value; if that's all they're dependi

on...so then I think you've got to look at other things; for example I found the very first section of that quite amusing, because it played on clichés, and expanded them, and took them literally; and I thought that was quite amusing...

L5: What do you mean?

L14: Well the, what was it, Crimson Life Assurance thing, the...what was it, the Sea of Financial, Financial Seas or something...and they literally, virtually showed you that, didn't they? They took cliché after cliché and expanded it...

L5: Oh I see yes, oh, yes...that's interesting, because I was going to make, I was hoping to make a point about that some of the sketches were clever, but not funny; I thought that bit...like the Emerald City, do you know that bit, like Emerald City, Wizard of Oz, and they come up to the City of London, or The City, financial City, yes...yes, I thought, very clever, you know, there was the ship, and there was the...changed a bit, didn't they, into sort of...the pirate-type film, and then at the end they have that sort of musical bit, the song at the end, all of them singing that sort of...and I thought, I thought, this is clever, and I'm quite enjoying myself, trying to spot the cliché and, and say where it came from, and how witty they were being but...I wasn't really laughing...

Q: Yes; another, another way of putting that question, is where does the pleasure of comedy, humour, shade into other kinds of pleasures?

L12: Mm...yes...

Q: Yes, what...can you distinguish between them? That's the problem

L12: Yes...I mean I didn't find that at all funny, that first section; I mean I was really debating whether to ring, you know, 'this is not funny at all' or the next bit...(L14 agreeing)...and I was completely lost as to what we were supposed to be thinking or...I couldn't recognize it, really, as kind of Monty Python...what I enjoyed was then the reference back to it further on, when they sort of talk of it about being a B-movie, which I thought was rather cleverly done...

L5: It was like...

Q: Which is a bit like the original Monty Python television programmes where you had bits of the News coming in, or...

L12: Yes...there was always...yes, that's right, or where you have the gas men lined up, and they were still there three sketches later, which I thought was wonderfully original at the time...

Q: I mean yes...getting back, back to something else which I think is very interesting, you said (L14) about if...dirty words have been used, you seemed to imply that once it's been done, once or twice, then it doesn't work any more...

L14: If it's been, if that is what is supposed to be funny, the sheer shock value, of saying something that's not normally said on television, I think, you know, it's bound to diminish each time it's used...if that is the pure reason.

Q: Don't you think it's also...has it got something to do with the people watching, or...I mean my experience sometimes has been that I mean, whenever anybody says some so-called dirty word, it raises a laugh...

L14: Yes (?)

Q: How many times does it happen?

L12: But doesn't it, won't it depend on the context, though?

Q: Of course, it will, yes...

L12: Yes, like, I mean I didn't see the Ben Elton sketch, but I can imagine, having seen Ben Elton, what that was like...and I mean I enjoy, I mean I thought that the sex talk with the kids was hilarious, because it was just what doesn't happen in schools, you know, talking about the finer detail, all that sort of thing, was amazingly funny, hilarious...and also the way the kid responded to it, which, it could have been any subject at all, it's (?) next week, and it was just perfectly obs, beautifully observed classroom practice.

Q: Well that's what I'm asking, is, which is...which is the stronger element in that, I mean there are several things floating around, one is there's a sort of satire, or, you know, on the sorts of things that happen in classrooms, the fact that that sort of thing isn't dealt with at all...the other thing that's happening is that there is explicit language being used; and at the end of it all you know, as you say, you can find it very funny; is that language part of what you find funny?

L5: I think in that sketch it's...sorry...

Q: Sorry I mean I...

L12: After you?... (confusion as to who should speak) Well I don't know, I'm not sure where one thing ends and one thing begins, with humour; it's quite...it's also the way John Cleese parodies the schoolteacher which is brilliant...and one's enjoyment at their ability to act so well, and just slip into those roles; there are all sorts of pleasures which overflow and intertwine...and in a cert...yes, the pleasure in, I say, the absurd classroom, but the fact that they're talking about something that people don't even, find it difficult to even talk about, in mixed social company, kind of doubly rams that home, doesn't it? (general laughter)

Q: ...if you'll pardon the expression!

L14: ...always use the expression...(hilarity)...

L5: Yes, hang on...I was going to say much the same thing; I think in the end that became funnier, I think almost when she came on the bed it became maybe too explicit, not the sex I meant too explicit, but the...

L12: ...you mean the joke had gone far enough...yes...

L5: Yes, the joke was just oh...it was a bit much; the funny thing was, I think the subtlety of, as you said, the...the shy grammar school boys...grammar school boys, I don't know; you know shy, tentative,...sort of (naff) rigidly trying to...make sure that they were going to come out of school...(L12 laughing) ...that was the funny bit, and his, as you say, his inability to communicate towards them...

L12: But I mean he might just have been doing a Latin lesson, mightn't he, really...

L5: Yes, yes...that's what I mean...yes...

L12: ...that was the double point of it, wasn't it, really, that he wasn't doing it, he was actually talking about things that people find difficult to talk about...

L5: ...that's right, so by the time the woman came on...(?)...

L12: ...the point of the joke really was...yes...but there's always that sense I think with 'sketches', that you feel, however much

you've enjoyed them there's often that 'how are they going to get out of this?' feeling, like with the Death one, you know, all right,...follow me, you know where does it actually lead to? And what was I think very good about the series on television initially was that, when they couldn't, when they'd made their point and they wanted to end the sketch, they'd go into a cartoon, you know, or 16 tons, or someone saying 'This is a very silly sketch!' and now for something completely different! I mean, they actually linked them well...which was almost an admission, well hang on, all right we've made the joke, on to something else...

Q: To some extent, half...it's half-way to abandoning the punch-line altogether, and substituting, substituting another type of mechanism for a punch-line...

L12: Yes...yes.

L14: Going back to the schoolboy sketch, though, a lot of the pleasure of that was confounded expectations of other things, wasn't it...even the initial scene, where they're all working away...(L12 bursts into laughter)...and as soon as they know the master's coming they fell into what one believes the Bash Street Kids are like...(?) stuff round the classroom...

Q: Umm...another area, which we haven't really touched on; when can we...I mean this is just a general question, but we can link it to the film...when can we find things funny when we find the subject-matter sort of dubious or we don't like the subject-matter; I'm thinking about racist jokes, sexist jokes...something where we wouldn't expect to be able to find something funny...

L12: Well that is harder, isn't it, you know...I found myself in that position with the, you know, all the naked women chasing the bloke over the cliff, and they were actually self-consciously saying, weren't they, the reason he...he died was for actually doing a sexist joke, you see...

L5: ...they're putting their own sort of safety-net, then...that's quite interesting...

L12: Yes...yes...

L5: ...that is quite interesting because you don't know whether they're going to be aware that you're aware that it's a safety net...

L12: Yes...but they are, because they're clever, you see...

L5: Well you don't know, you see, I mean...is it, yes, is it just clever-clever, two fingers up to you, mate, we're going to put these women in anyway...

L12: ...well yes, ultimately...

L5: ...or not...I didn't find that particularly funny, but I don't, I didn't, I didn't object to it...on sexist grounds; I just didn't find it very funny...

L14: I never thought that Monty Python was particularly noted for it's feminist tendency; even that first thing, you know the Crimson Assurance one, where there's a woman, she's sent to put the kettle on; I noticed that...

L12: Oh I don't think it's known for its feminism, but from the period it comes from, it's a period when men...feminism was, was around, wasn't it, and growing, it's an intellectual humour, part of it's an intellectual humour, and therefore, they can't not, as Cambridge graduates, be aware of what's

happening in society, in that sense, you see what I mean

L14: yes, yes...

L5: ...that's what I mean about the...

L12: ...and a lot of, I mean, women I think find them as amusing as men...do they? don't they?...in your findings?

Q: I don't know yet, I haven't looked at the data yet, but I, that's the impression I get...but on the other hand...

L12: They dress up as women a lot...

L14: Yes they do don't they...

L12: ...and I don't find that objectionable, actually, at all, because I mean OK they parody sort of Northern working-class women, big bosoms and so on, I mean there's that, but it's not over the top in something, the way that say Les Dawson is, or even Benny Hill; but they also parody you know working-class Northern men, don't they...

L5: Why is...I mean what's the difference between the way they do it and the way Benny Hill does, what (?) Monty Python?

L12: Well because they actually put it in, put it in a wider context, I think, because OK they're taking the mickey out of you know, like in the sketch with the children, you know the Catholic couple, but I mean they're also taking the mickey out of the working-class man, aren't they...

L5: Exactly, it's not as if...

L12: ...it's a kind of classist thing, actually...

L5: Yes, isn't that a sort...isn't that like, isn't that Cambridge boys being really clever, you know, it's, it's funny, I'm not saying...

L12: Well yes, but in talking about sexism and that I think what I'm saying is, it's a classist thing I think, really...

L5: That's, yes, I think...

L12: ...that the whole point of it was actually ...

L5: I mean I could object quite easily to that sketch, with the babies being born, and, you know, too thick for contraception and all that, I mean...I could object, basically because I'm a Yorkshire person...

Q: ...Third World, yes...

L5: ...I could be so upset...I mean it does, it sort of annoys me, but that, it comes back to the point I was, where, are they aware of themselves being a bit stupid...

L12: ...well it's back to that point you made, yes...

L5: ...you know, and you know, and they're appealing to certain things, I mean is the Irish joke harmless or not, is the Yorkshire working-class flatcap, does this person exist?...I mean it obviously gets a lot of laughs...

L12: ...but you see it's not just they do that, they actually, they, I mean, they always seem to, the main thrust of their humour always seemed to be anti-establishment, so it was always picking on the army and public-school headmasters and figures of the Establishment; so I mean there's always that sort of check and balance, isn't there, in a sense...

L5: Yes, yes...

L12: I mean they kind of, they're like 'Private Eye', kind of have a

go at everything, really...

Q: Yes, I mean they...

L12: ...they're particularly anti-sexist about that...

L5: But they do it from a very very pampered position!

L12: Well they do but I think that, they are also aware of that anyway, they're very, they seem to be very aware of the mould they were pushed into, in terms of public school and Cambridge, and what sort of people society expects to come out of that, and they've actually turned it on its head, and that's really why I suppose a lot of us find it funny, and at the time it came out...

L5: ...in fact John Cleese is so anti-establishment, he's SDP now!

L12: Well you know, he's, what, forty-eight years old, I mean, you know, he's middle-aged, and everybody...it's the classic...

L5: ...yes, I realize that, I realize that, but it's...

Q: They've certainly said that at that time their targets were, as you say, military establishment, chartered surveyors...

L12: ...yes...accountants...

L5: There's always though a sex...there's a lot of, like, sexual things as well, sexual fetishism about all these things they attack, they've always been, which I,...vague perceptions of the world associated with public-school sensibilities, really strange sort of ideas, not strange, but...

L12: ...yes, fetishistic...

L5: ...like about the army, you see it's funny, but it's almost camp...like when he was, wahatsis name, when they were looking for the fish, very bizarre...

L14: Yes, that was, wasn't it...

L12: ...there are, but there are, there are sort of serial elements, aren't there...

L5: yes...that (? )...surreal...

Q: That's, that's an exception...

L5: ...it was a bit more than just sort of, yes I thought that was quite exceptional...exceptional, for them...

Q: ...in this film, anyway, I mean there are...

L12: Yes...yes...

L5: They were just...it was pushing things...it was...funny, very funny...

Q: Yes, somebody in one of the other groups said that it stood out for them as being, you know much more absurd than anything else...

L5: ...it was much more arty, if you like...

L12: ...but it was...yes it was, but that's also the sort of thing you'd expect more in the actual original series; and the cartoons were quite surrealistic, weren't they...

L5: ...one wouldn't expect...yes, the cartoons always were, but I'm not sure that I'd have expected anything like that sketch in the series, the one we just referred to, I don't think I...

L12: Well I think there was much more kind of...I don't know, variety...



- Q: Well shall we say the sort of, yes the aimless, relatively aimless absurdity of it, perhaps the imagery...
- L5: The imagery was much different in that...
- Q: ...than it was ten years on...
- L5: There was, yes, aimlessness...you had sketches which were... (?)...and things like that...
- Q: Anyway, I mean...let's get back for a moment to the possible sexism; I mean this business about the fact that it's, I mean you were asking the question about why it's different, their playing, their being in drag from, say Benny Hill...or other comedians...I mean,
- L12: What is the difference?
- Q: I mean what does it do to whether it's sexist or not?...you know, those representations of women, sort of...
- L5: Maybe you feel that because they're Cambridge boys, you have confidence in their ultimate, I don't know...
- L12: Well I think it's because they, they're not, I mean I wouldn't actually call them sexist, they actually poke fun at a hell of a lot of things in society, so you can't just isolate that; whereas with Benny Hill he takes the, he takes the 'general line', doesn't he, you know, which is, let's poke fun at women, you know, or let's have a cheap thrill, at women's expense, you know...
- Q: Yes...what, what...yes I meant that the, a sexist representation, for what that's worth, are those representations of women, if such they are, say the cleaning-lady being vomited on, or whatever; is that in any way...I was, I've suggested that a couple of times and other people have said well, they don't react to that, because it's a bloke in drag...
- L5: ...that specific thing, the cleaning-woman...
- L12: Well I thought that was, yes, I thought that was a bit, I mean my initial reaction was a bit sort of 'yeurch', you know, that she was getting, getting it, and then I thought well hang on a minute, that's a man dressed up as a woman, isn't it, I mean, you get into that thing; and also John Cleese was getting splattered, wasn't he, as the waiter, so...you know...
- L5: ...yes, other people got splattered...
- L12: But the thing is, I mean and it is I suppose really your point, you just don't know whether they're, they're aware of or not, you know, are they saying well this is the position of women in society, you know there are a lot of working-class women who are like this who are shat upon, and therefore...or, I mean are they, or are they actually joining the bandwagon, I mean that's what's a bit difficult...it is a question of how much you trust them in terms of the other social comment that comes from the other sketches...
- L5: ...that's what I was saying...
- L12: ...and I think, speaking as somebody who's a feminist, I suppose I could say I presume you do trust them; if I didn't, I wouldn't find them very funny, in the way that I don't find Benny Hill funny...
- L5: ...that's what I was saying, you've got to...
- L12: ...well yes, the balance goes over, you know, it goes over the top.

L14: Well I suspect, and I hope nobody asks me to back this up because I'm not quite sure why I think it, but I suspect there's a strongly misogynist thread that runs through all that; and I find I have to step back from it to laugh...I do find them funny...but I (?)...

L12: But don't you think there is...don't you think there is in a lot of humour anyway? because humour is male and mainstream?

L14: Oh yes...I was just going to say, yes I was just going to say that all of this is really from a masculine point of view...

L12: Yes, yes...

L14: ...and I'm very much aware...perhaps because I've, since then I've seen people like Victoria Wood, French and Saunders...

L12: ...well right...yes...

L14: ...and having seen that control, once you've seen that you then start to...

L12: ...yes, suddenly now there's a feminist backlash to it, isn't there...

L14: Yes, yes, one we were watching here, we're seeing a man's point of view again...

L12: And it would have been interesting to have seen the Ben Elton sketch, and I would have found that very interesting...

L5: Yes but Ben Elton...

L12: ...to see a man talking about periods, I mean, you know...

L5: But you're going into...this is what I find so difficult, 'cos we're talking about Monty Python, are they aware or not, and Ben Elton obviously is so aware...and yet...

L12: ...yes but what we're, we're implying is,...

L14: ...what did he actually say?!

L5: What did he actually say? Well I'll tell you the sketch, as I remember it...it was...

L12: Come on, stand up then!

L5: it was, no no I'll tell you about it (?)...it was...he was talking about how men, it's all right for men sitting around, rugby players sitting around farting, and being like really, you know almost competi...macho competitive about farting, all right...and then he likened this to, he said, what about, what about if women decided to have their little competition, and started coming out saying 'cor, I've got a really heavy one now', and he was going on like this, and we were going, I was going God! what's happening?...and yet everybody was laughing when he was going on about men...

L12: ...and didn't people...who were you with, then, when you watched it?

L5: Some friends that I live with, but there's a large studio audience, anyway, on Saturday Live 'cos it's live...and so there's (imitates laughter), and I'm like this...oh no, I wasn't, that night I wasn't with my friends, what was so funny, what was so funny actually, I was at home with my dad, and I said, hey, here's a good programme we watch...(laughter)...

L12: What was your dad's reaction?

L5: He went...you know he just, my dad...that's another story but basically he didn't, he didn't, he didn't think it was very

funny...

Q: But that would influence your response as well...

L5: Yes, obviously...I realize now, because I was there and I felt almost, I felt very self-conscious about the fact that I'd put it on deliberately and told him to watch this programme...

L12: But you see what we're saying...

L5: ...but the studio audience did...did laugh, sort of...well they sort of laughed...yes...

L12: ...a bit tentatively, yes...but what L14 is saying, and I'm sort of with you there is that because in the last three or four years you've actually got sort of female comedians, whatever you want to call them, actually...coming up with stand-up, you know stand-up routines, and sketches which are very much from the female point of view, Victoria, French and Saunders etcetera etcetera, Fascinating Aida, which is really sort of...looking, hang on a minute, chaps, this is what women think, and there's a lot of humour too in what we see in you; you know, would it have been more appropriate for, you know, Victoria Wood to have talked about her last period, and..(?)...

L5: Yes...well that's what I'm saying, that's what I was trying to say, that Ben Elton, Ben Elton, doing that, it was, I didn't know, I suppose, he was...

L12: ...but it seemed funny a man doing it...that's what I'm saying;

L5: ...it seems strange for a man...I don't know whether it seems strange to me because he was actually talking about periods or because it was a man doing it...again, I'd like to think it was because it was a man trying to...as I saw it, toady up to some...something ideologically sound...

L12: ...but it's a combination of things, it's a man talking about a women's domain, and it's a subject that's not talked about in public, and it's a subject that, they won't even, you know they're not going to even allow advertising, you're not even allowed to mention sanitary towels; at least there is a Tampax advert on Channel 4...

L5: ...I was going to say, the film tonight, was quite funny,... from the woman...

L12: ...but it's circumvented, they're not actually allowed to talk about sanit...it doesn't mention the word 'tampon' or period...

L5: ...yes, that's right...

L12: ...they say 'is it your time of the month?' and this kind of thing, it's all euphemisms...they've had strong reactions of whether they should have that or not, people saying, 'I don't want this when I'm eating my dinner', hear about women's periods, but I mean what about toilet roll? you know...really when you think about it, you know...yes, she did come out with that line 'I'm having a heavy period'...

L5: ...and that was quite funny...but it came from her...I mean that...doesn't sound any more shocking to what Ben Elton was doing, but the fact that it was Ben Elton in his, that lamé suit...

L12: Maybe that's like the next...sort of area of humour, because now it's OK to talk about bodily humour...

L5: ...yes but as soon as...

L12: ...and sex, it's now OK to go on to sort of womens things...

- L5: As soon as it becomes the next area, it won't be funny, it'll be...
- L12: ...yes but the question is, where it'll end, you know...
- Q: I think, there tends to be an assumption here that, you know, once it's been done, it's not funny any more; whereas, to some extent it's also...sort of unconscious, you know, it's something in us, which, perhaps there are anxieties about particular areas...of the body and so on...
- L14: Oh...I think that's true...
- Q: ...and so, maybe we need to, there's a sort of safety-valve which, you know,...
- L12: Yes, I don't know, really, I'm still thinking about that area because, you know, in terms of, I don't know, sort of fart-type jokes, or that sort of thing, I mean, they've been around for centuries, haven't they, and people still laugh at them...
- L14: ...the whoopee cushion was the ultimate fart-joke, wasn't it...
- L12: ...the whoopee cushion is the ultimate thing for kids, isn't it, and for adults alike, you know people still find it funny; whether it's an area that people still feel embarrassed about and therefore they need that release periodically...
- L5: ..that's your second one! (general hilarity)
- L12: ...Freudian slips, aren't there!...But...you see what I mean? I mean I think the shock, there's a shock element of menstruation being, periods being mentioned for the first time by Ben Elton and...on a live programme, but that can, that, there's a lot of mileage in that, isn't there, you know, really.
- L14: Oh there is..this is something not to do with Monty Python directly at all but, thinking about Personal Services which I had to see twice...
- L12: ...that's right, it's Terry, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones... Monty Python...it's on the track, isn't it...
- L14: ...but you, if you've seen it, if you remember there's a scene in the cafe, with the three women, or rather two women and one transvestite, talking about men and the size of their equipment and all that kind of thing; and one of the reviewers said you know this was obviously a role-reversal, this was women tilting at male power...it was a man who wrote it and I thought: you've obviously never listened to women in the staffroom! I don't know about what your experiences are...but I am sure...women do talk about that kind of thing...
- L12: No but I think (?) everything that women...because the male viewpoint is the dominant viewpoint, they never think there could be an alternative, and that women might laugh or joke about that kind of thing...(all talk simultaneously here) ...well I mean in the way that men sit around and make sexist comments about women and the size of their knockers or whatever, women can equally do the same thing, I mean and obviously that completely undercuts men, because they haven't even thought about it, some men.
- L5: I mean you're saying that you all make sexist comments about men...
- L12: No I'm not saying we all make sexist comments...(L12 and L5 arguing simultaneously)
- L5: No no no no, I'm asking you, not you all, I said that you will, you will...I never said you all...

L12: You can have a private joke, can't you, with a girl-friend, and women do talk very easily, more easily than men do...

L5: Yes...but...I'm just interested in the idea of, you described what we, we, as men, generally speaking...

L12: ...generally, generally speaking, except...

L5: ...listen, listen, (L12 laughs)...we as men, generally, say, pass sexist comments, and then you said but we can do the same about men, if we want...

L12: ...if we want...

L5: ...so you can make sexist comments as well about men...

L12: Of course.

L5: Yes; so you're, so basically both make sexist comments about each other, and it's all right, it's all even, because we do it to each other...

L12: ...yes, but the male, the male, no, 'cos it's not all even because the male...

L14: ...it's not public...

L12: ...because it's not public, and it's not accepted, and because the culture is a male culture...

L5: ...you mean the fact that we can make sexist jokes louder than you can...and get away with it...

L12: It's like black people might make comments about white people... I think, yes...I think...

L14: I think really it's (?) isn't it...

L12: We do it out of defence, I suppose, don't we, (?)...

L5: I should think the majority of men who do that sort of thing do it out of a different sort of defence, as well...

L12: Of course they do, of course they do...

L14: The thing is that male sexist humour, if you like, has been the predominant form...

L12: ...exactly...(L5 agrees)

L14: ...but when I say...what that critic found so interesting about that film was something that I hear, well no I don't hear it every day, but I do, I mean we get together in the staffroom and we discuss men and we say my God it's about time he wore underpants, or something like that, and then it goes on from there...and it amazed me that he hadn't even thought that this kind of (?) went on...

L12: Was he shocked then?

L14: I think he thought it was a rather interesting role-reversal, it was in 'New Statesman' you see, so he thought it was a very interesting reversal from a social point of view...

L12: But it's not...the kind of thing that actually happens...

L5: I don't think, I mean, personally it doesn't surprise me one bit, that you were discussing men in the same way that men would discuss...I'm not trying to say, hey (?) or anything, it just doesn't surprise me...

L12: ...but that may be to do with your age and this critic was in a period where he ...hadn't even questioned that women had a mind to think like that, even...

Q: Let's, let's get back to Meaning of Life

L12: Let's get back on the...(general laughter)

Q: ...raising the question of...you just raised the question of age and everything, things like that...what kinds of people, do you think, appreciated Monty Python when it first came out? and particularly...this film...

L12: I think that's an interesting one, because there are repeats on now, aren't there, on Saturday nights, and I was at home with my family last Saturday, and I know that my mother doesn't find it very funny, though she's got a very good sense of humour, we can giggle like two schoolgirls together, and she's seventy, at certain things; but she doesn't understand, she doesn't really understand the poking fun at establishment type jokes; she just thinks of that as being silly, John Cleese being silly, his silly walks, that sort of thing, you see; so she can't actually join in in the way we might sit together and watch something that was a bit more kind of mainstream...

Q: So something being 'silly' isn't...

L5: Well Monty Python is really mainstream now...

L12: Well it's a bit...well yes it is, but you've still got to be probably below a certain age to appreciate that, below whatever age they are, mid-forties, probably, because there's a real kind of generation gap there, I think. And when I watched it... (?)...I was like, whatever, sixteen or seventeen or something, and I thought it was wonder...I just couldn't believe, I accidentally put it on Sunday night; and I was just enthralled, I thought what the hell is this programme?you know...

Q: ...that was very exciting, yes...

L12:...it was like being hit in the face with something, it was very exciting, and it sort of coincided with my growing up, so I suppose in that sense I've got a kind of special place for it in my heart, in a way I probably will defend it, because it coincides with pleasant associations in my life...and people you mixed with, you know, both sexes enjoyed it, and...there was a lot of pleasure in that...and I found a lot of pleasure in actually watching them, and I find Michael Palin quite attractive, so I quite enjoy watching him...you know, there's a kind of pleasure oh here they are, here's the lads! you know what I mean? there's a sort of pally feeling I get when I watch them...

Q: All those...all those reasons sort of contribute to sort of being inclined to accept them...

L12: oh, yes...yes...

Q: ...maybe they're not, sort of...I mean in a sense there must be patriarchal, sexist things in the background somewhere, but...

L12: Yes...yes, it kind of warms me, yes...whereas if I was of a different, you know, if I was a thirteen, fourteen year-old, now, I'd think, oh, passé, you know, I'd be really into The Young Ones, like that I used to teach at school were, but it's a question of what's on when you're kind of getting to that, when you suddenly kind of, stop being a child and you suddenly see the world through adult eyes, you know, which happens somewhere in your teenage period...it's about being very impressionable, I think...but I remember, what used to get me, that, when I was sort of at college and that, that it used to be such a cult thing, but the cult obviously widened, like all cults do, until it became, like, a very established thing with young people...ahh, got to sit and watch Monty Python...we used

to sit and watch it in the student Union building, and like five hundred people watching it, and it was very interesting to see what bits people laughed at...and some of the very obvious jokes, like sort of, I don't know, anal humour type things, there were people that would be rolling, literally sort of rolling on the floor; but some of them didn't understand the kind of more subtle intellectual type things...and that was like that became the cult of the cult, so like the Jean-Paul Sartre do you remember the Jean-Paul Sartre sketch, the laundry, and then there's Mrs cardboard cut-out, and (?) Libre and all that, which I think is hilariously funny, but there were some people, sort of it was a bit beyond them, because, I think people get out of it what they can, which is probably true of everything, really...but...there is a lot of subtlety there, but it's quite intellectual, a lot of it, and you've got to know about Jean-Paul Sartre and the joke about freedom, to be able to laugh at that; if you don't know it, you're going to not find that very funny..., you're going to wait for the next sketch, the next cartoon...

L5: How much do you think, I mean, to know, understand that Jean-Paul Sartre sketch, I mean how much about Sartre do you need to know?

L12: Well you just need to know who he is, that he's French, and he was a philosopher, and he was sixty years trying to find out if he was free or not, I mean...you've just got to know a bit about him, haven't you...if, you know, if you don't know that, you can't laugh at that joke, it means nothing...

L5: ...yes, something...those references, the references they make, they constantly do that, even in their most ridiculous humour, do you remember the...the Drunken Philosopher Song?...it goes... "boozy beggar...can drink you under the table"...and it goes on and on, and then the refrain "Socrates himself is permanently pissed..."...and it, that's, that was very funny, but the actual references were quite high-brow...philosophically very highbrow.,

L12: ...well they are...yes...

Q: Do you think it's knowing something about those characters, or just simply...being able to use them in a sketch...

L12: ...that's funny...

Q: ...actually having them as references...

L5: I think it's...you know they would say...you see they're always in an advantageous position, because they would say "oh we're debunking all this" you know, and "taking the piss out of philosophy, we're taking the piss out of university", they always, they've been there, they've done university, they've studied these people, it's a very, very...you know it's satire of quite a...reasonably high knowledge-level, not necessarily intellectual...it's not...

L12: ...because it's about two housewives, isn't it, in the launderette, looking him up, you know...but it's when they're arguing about philosophy in the launderette, and there's Mrs Cardboard-Cutout goes past, I mean...

L5: Yes...yes, that's right...

Q: ...and there's another one in the supermarket...

L12: ...so, but it's just the same as...as the boys in school, isn't it, that it's totally the unexpected, isn't it, of, instead of having Benny Hill or whoever would have two housewives talking a load of nonsense, you know, very everyday kind of stuff, what they're doing is having a highly intellectual conversation...

- Q: ...which in fact works, could be said to work against the sort of classist notions of ignorance and so on...(general agreement) ...apparently really sort of,...(progressive)
- L5: That's right, the fact that it's, that sort of everyday knowledge sort of...no, that it's becoming (common?), such as Sartre and philosophy...It was a pilgrimage, wasn't it, if I remember the sketch, didn't they actually go on a pilgrimage to Paris?...
- L12: Well they do, because they ring him up; they're arguing over something, so they decide, and it's 'Paris 346', and they ring him up, and they speak in pidgin-French, to his cleaner, and they can't get him, so they're going to go over to, to sort out the question, you see...(?) idea really...I mean it's totally bizarre, but,...there's all sorts of elements there, I think it's very rich, you see, I think there's, you can shred the layers away, there a hell of a lot there that you can actually laugh at...you can laugh at the Mrs Cardboard-Cutout idea, you know...and I think, as I said, their references back and forward are very clever, and lead you to think...they play with time, they play with time...
- Q: Which is...which is one of the important things missing in Meaning of Life, in a sense...
- L12: Yes I mean I, the feeling I have with this film is that they had all these wonderful ideas for sketches like a big fat man exploding, whatever...but they didn't know how to link them, so they kind of went into this Seven Sta...Seven Ages of man, Shakespeare thing, and I felt that was a kind of imposed structure, I wasn't terribly happy about...I was aware of the structure because of filling in that, where I knew I'd got to Section five and it was, like, the Autumn, so I was looking, thinking right OK, now we're into middle-aged people...but sometimes the sketch kind of went way off, and didn't actually stay on the...the 'age' theme...and I thought it was kind of imposed a bit, that structure, and I think, I'm not sure it worked really...
- Q: Well in fact the sketches were practically written before; and they got together and couldn't think of how to put them together at all, until suddenly they had this brilliant idea, something about being...comment...and within half an hour they'd cobbled it together and said, yes, you know, this'll do it!
- L12: But why did they feel they had to do that linking, because the programmes never had that...did they, they deliberately...
- L5: I mean...it's so blatant...if they're expecting people to understand their philosophical references, I'm sure they expected people to realize that it is cobbled together, and it's just a joke, I mean it's so obviously done, that they must know that the person who understands the references to xyz philosophers can say,...God...they're just taking the piss...
- L12: Yes but I just felt it was kind of, it didn't work naturally...
- Q: But on the other hand they, I guess they would have been going after, the Monty...Holy Grail and Life of Brian, I suppose you're looking, you're looking for a wider audience, aren't they?...as well...
- L12: Are you also looking for a narrative structure...
- L5: They might, I mean they might have been, I suppose they might have, it might have been a...marketing ploy...I never thought of that...
- Q: I think initially that structure was...



L5: ...a marketing ploy to get everybody in, and...I mean, it was, part of the running joke was the fact that these sketches were just so ridiculously, the connections were so tenuous between the title and what the sketch was about, I mean that was part of the joke...so I mean...

Q: Yes, at one point...the point at which it falls apart is the Live Organ Transplant...(laughter)...and 'Part 6b, The Meaning of Life'!

L5: Yes, it's just, you know, just stupid...

Q: Umm...I'll just see, I'm looking through my list of...yes, I mean one thing which we haven't raised, which I mean may not get us anywhere, is in talking about comedy and humour...I mean quite a lot of the time we were talking about jokes; does it make sense to talk about films like Meaning of Life as if they're jokes...what's, how do you compare, what do you see as the relation between...

L12: What do you mean 'jokes'? You mean like, when people sit and just tell jokes?

Q: (yes...)

L12: Well I, yes...I mean actually I wrote something about this on your form...which you'll see, in a few minutes! I mean I don't think jokes, I mean, when we talk about humour I don't think of jokes, I don't think jokes are particularly funny, I think... yes OK the first one, I might laugh, and then, I mean, if I try and remember them, I tend to get the punchline wrong or something, ruined it...I personally think that ...(?), but I might as well say it, I suppose...you know, it's the situations that arise from real life that are funnier; it's the ironies and the expectations that aren't met, are undercut, which I think are funnier...the sketches aren't really, they're not based around a joke, are they? It's not stand-up comic joke thing; it's a kind of observation of life: look, this is how it is, and if you just slip that down a bit, you know, it's something else again...isn't it absurd, isn't life absurd? And I think it's hilariously funny, but...I'm not a jokey sort of person...(short gap here)...and suddenly the carpet's pulled from underneath them, there's this big hole in the floor, kind of thing, it's that idea, metaphorically speaking, that, that the outcome isn't what they thought, while we, we often have prior knowledge, we have knowledge that they don't have, and we can laugh at their expense. There's that element, isn't there. But there's also, like, there's visual humour, though, isn't there, like when in the Tiger sketch, when <sup>he</sup> ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> looked down, there was this tiger's head which was kind of moving, which was just visually funny!

Q: ...which usually gets a laugh...

L12: ...and then, then there's the verbal dexterity, which can be funny, there's all sorts of different things that are funny!

Q: What does a joke entail?

L12: Do you want to put it on pause?

Q: And you're not going until you've told me! (laughter)

L12: Well actually that was one of their sketches, wasn't it, about the funniest joke in the world, everyone laughed so much, they died...and they got rid of the Germans...

L5: That was a joke, wasn't it, 'you're not going 'til you've told me...'

- Q: Well you see, I don't think it is...that's what I mean; I think that that sort of comment you'll find in films like this, surely...is there...
- L5: ...it's a joke, though...
- L12: Why don't you tell us what you mean by 'joke'?
- L5: ...I mean you're taking...the unexpected, taking a situation, and giving it an apparent context...(?)...I'd have said it was a joke...  
+ suddenly you change it
- Q: It depends where you situate the definition, the part of, you know the part of the definition...
- L12: Is there a definition of a joke, what does the dictionary say on 'joke'?
- Q: I don't know what the dictionary says, but I know what Freud says!
- L12, L14: What does Freud say?
- Q: You don't really want to know, do you?
- L14: Yes!
- Q: Umm...there's a particular configuration of...of positions, you've got the first person, there's a second person, which would usually be a woman, right, to whom, this is why men are generally meant to be the ones who tell jokes, because there is a sexual, in very broad terms, a sexual, sort of aggressivity felt, either desire or aggression...felt towards this woman, which is originally, which is the mother-figure, originally...and one wants to express this, this aggressivity through, through 'smut', through actually some sort of sexual suggestion towards the woman; because that isn't allowed, socially, one translates it, by a process similar to dream, into some other structure, which conceals the motivation for that, and that is through the joke-work, and so one tells the joke to the third person, in whom that gives pleasure, and one gets satisfaction from giving pleasure to the third person, which one can't get from expressing the smut...
- L12: ...that's more to do with kind of...
- Q: ...that's the structure...
- L12: ...the function of humour, as well, isn't it...
- Q: yes the psychological function of it..but then, Freud goes through a lot of different mechanisms in the actual joke, how they work, double meanings and so on...I've forgotten some of those because they weren't really important...(?) joking, sort of I think, you know, through the opposite, saying something through the opposite, exaggeration was another one, using exaggeration and so on...
- L12: But, but there is a kind of cathartic, a kind of psychological cathartic release, isn't there, as you say not being able to say directly what you'd like to say, and therefore it's kind of disguised, isn't it, and...
- Q: Yes, it's displaced...
- L12: ...displaced...(?)...but I mean...but, Freud, classic, you know always from the male point of view...that's what (L14) and I were saying, that in the last few years, women have now found their voice publicly, in terms of being able to tell jokes; because it was always a sort of male myth, wasn't it, that women didn't have a sense of humour; they weren't allowed to because they always had to be the butts of male jokes...

- Q: ...which raises the problem, I mean this is why Freud's theory becomes problematic, when you start talking about women, women's jokes, I mean, all right, humour is something else, but then it,
- L12: Freud didn't understand women, basically...
- Q: ...women stand up and tell jokes, as well, all right, but then you have to really rethink that completely, about when women start telling jokes, now is that because they're taking, is Freud's theory still...fundamentally and largely right, and women are taking the...that masculine position in expressing some kind of sexual...
- L14: ...yes...
- Q: ...aggressivity, is that model still right, or does the model have to be abandoned?
- L12: Looking back...looking back, it's definitely there, isn't it, I mean Victoria Wood laughing at those...the plumber, she's talking about the plumbers, the builders were in, she said, didn't she, and she was laughing at...the bloke with his bum hanging out, and all that, I mean that was very much women poking back at, fun at men...
- L14: Oh I see, yes, I see, a complete reversal...
- L12: ...you know...but it's, it's, the thing is that the woman is in the actual active position rather than the passive recipient, I mean it's reversed...
- Q: I'm not sure, again, is that a joke, you know, one is actually, that kind of thing is, if you're poking fun at somebody, I mean in Freud's terms the distinction is between that, that mechanism and the 'comic', which for him is, is the recognition of some kind of superiority, a discrepancy in the, well he talks about energy and so on, but I mean in a sense the energy one expends on something compared with the energy that somebody else has expended, has expended about something and one laughs because of the difference, one has some sort of sense of superiority, and in Freudian terms it would be the comic, those things about superiority; but then if something comes into it which is word-play, a sort of pun, or an exaggeration or using the opposite to get that point across, then you've got the joke-mechanism coming in...
- L12: I'm not sure I'm clear on...not from your definitions, but I don't know that I'm clear in my head, 'cos you know what to think about it, I mean what is comic and what is joke, I mean I don't think we've defined these words closely, do you...I mean that's very comical, but I wouldn't call it...jokey...whereas I might call...I don't know, The Two Ronnies, some of their sketches...are jokes...sort of puns and so on...and visual jokes...but it's not necessarily 'comic'...I don't know, it's very...
- Q: Yes...I mean there's an example of a visual joke, I mean there's a guy who's written about the visual jokes in film, and for...for him, a joke on film is something which, which plays around with the structure of the film; in Monty Python and the Holy Grail when you've got the rabbit...this sort of clockwork rabbit in the cave, which attacks the soldiers, I think at one point there's a monster, isn't there in the cave, which appears, but then in order to get rid of the monster, Terry Gilliam has to suffer a heart attack, while he's drawing, and that, that would be a sort of joke, because it's using the mechanism of the film, film-making and the animation, the fact that the animator has to drop dead half-way through, that's a

j...that's called...

L12: But you see when you've got the narra...it's also to do with expectation of the narrative, isn't it, that the Holy Grail, you have, because we live in a culture, an idea, you have an idea of what the Grail should be, and therefore they can just set up that expectation and completely knock it down and that automatically becomes funny...that instead, I mean when they have the fight and they start lopping limbs off each other and then saying "it's only a scratch", they're taking the mickey out of so many conventions, isn't it...

Q: ...and also in this film the...the Zulu war...

L12: ..Yes, exactly, yes...and that's knocking at kind of macho images, isn't it, and also the stiff upper lip bit, and I mean there's just so many layers, there, when you actually analyse what you're laughing at...

Q: All right, have we exhausted everything?

L14: We probably haven't...

L12: No I'll probably go home and think of something, and say ! why didn't I say that!

Q: Well I'll collect up...

L12: I think you do sort of, I personally, being of that sort of generation, do warm to them, I know that's part of it...and I think you get, you get to know the repertoire, so you're looking for certain, when John Cleese comes on you're looking for particular types of characters that he plays and he does so well; and the same with...all of them, really...there's a pleasure in seeing who's going to dress up as a woman this time, or who's going to play the stiff upper lip...upper-class twit...

L5: ...that's precisely why, now, I don't find it so funny...

L12: Well, it's, well...I didn't say funny; there's a pleasure, it's pleasurable, like I'm meeting some old friends; but the humour is deadened somewhat because it's also predictable, so you have to weigh up a certain pleasure or warmth you get from that against the loss of cutting edge...of humour...

L5: I think that when they actually split, I think it was quite, quite perceptive of them to split up when they did because they could have gone on, and coined it in...I know they went into films but when they actually stopped on telly I think it was quite perceptive of them, because...I remember the later series were beginning to, to fizzle out...

Q: It was John Cleese who left...well he left the television series anyway...and the fourth series only had six programmes...

L5: That's right, without him...

Q: ...it was retitled...

L5: I was about third year at school, I think...

L12: You were so young, so young! What did you make of it, it was interesting when you said you first watched it when you were whatever, nine ten eleven...

L5: ...brilliant, I just thought it was brilliant...

L12: ...but I mean you were very young, that's...

L5: I just thought that it was...it was quite exciting; as I said, it was naughty, to be watching...late...

L12: ...what because of the...explicit language...

L5: ...because of the...I think...yes, and the, it was quite a grown-up humour, and you perceived it around as being quite...

Q: ...part of the pleasure would be quite simply the fact that one realizes that it is...grown-up...this must be good!

L12: ...it's forbidden fruit...yes...

L5: yes that's right...

L14: I remember that I was...

L5: ...and also...like...as I say, when these later series came on, although they weren't as good as the earlier stuff, at thirteen or fourteen, you're going home and you're watching it avidly and talking about it all day, next day at school...and, you know, you got sketches learned overnight, and you come back, ...(?)...

L12: I mean I think, it's easy to...

L5: ...the silliness of it...I think it does appear to, it does appeal to really silly schoolboys...

L12: I think it's also very easy to underestimate the importance of that kind of humour in your life, you know...that it's, it's you know it's equal to kind of pop-group adulation, or football team adulation, isn't it, because you do go to school and you say "did you see so-and-so...?"...and it's like the most important thing of the whole school day, yes...it's very...and the same, when I was like at college I would, I suppose subconsciously, kind of tune into people...(brief interruption) ...used to sort of subconsciously tune in to people who, who liked it in the way you did, there was obviously that kind of, you know which would be the same as liking the same pop group or something, wouldn't it, that idea of yes we're on the same side, kind of identification...yes...

Q: Well I mean John, John Cleese said that I mean in an interview that he was wondering about the audience response, because they used to go on tour, and he worked out, it was exactly, you know people would cheer when they recognized the Dead Parrot sketch, they wouldn't laugh very much all through it, and when it finished they'd cheer wildly again, so...people weren't actually laughing at the sketch at all, it was exactly that kind of...

L5: ...like a connoisseur Parrot Sketch!

L12: But you see, you know, Groucho Marx said, didn't he, if you get one sket, one joke in four you're doing well...the idea that they're so fast, but it's also that, you know tuning in to things, you don't always get what there is on offer, do you, you know, something doesn't appeal to you, but appeals to the next person...and that's why I thought it was quite good, rewatching them, not recently, but before, when they were on; but then they've set such a pattern for the way humour's gone through the seventies and eighties, that I think that's the problem, they're...not necessarily acknowledged as being as important as they are...I mean everyone kept saying, oh, Not The Nine O'Clock News, must watch that, and I thought, yes, it's very funny, but I still thought it was very derivative of Monty Python, I thought hang on, I've seen this before, you know...and I think the same even with The Young Ones, which I enjoy enormously but it's just...like a Monty Python sketch gone mad, isn't it really...

Q: In a sense it's derivative for us, for you, because that's our

generation, but people who are perhaps a bit older, who liked Monty Python, would, would still say that well yes, but that's a bit derivative, what about The Goon Show or whatever...

L12: ...well the Goon Show and even the sort of Beyond The Fringe... I was just going to say, it's the whole mould of alternative humour, really...

L14: ...well you talked earlier...about when you were a schoolboy ...watched Monty Python...(?)...revolutionary...

L5: No...it was just...

L14: Cool! cool, man...

L5: No, no no...

L14: What I was going to...

L5: sorry carry on...

L12: ...yes, we know what you mean...

L14: But...I suppose for us it was That Was The Week That Was, and the satire...

L12: yes, yes...

L14: I was a shade older than you were talking about then, but we would stay up on a Saturday night...that was where it was at! and watch it; funny enough watching the reruns of these quite recently; you sat there and you thought, Oh my God!...and we laughed at that...and that is quite one of the most disturbing things I've ever...

L12: ...yes I suppose when you realize...yes...

L14: ...it's like losing your religion, isn't it...suddenly it doesn't mean anything...

L12: ...but, only because it's set a pattern which is now being followed, and therefore it hasn't got the freshness...

L14: Yes...yes, yes...

L12: I mean Spitting Image, you know, is kind of reasonably new and different, and I suppose in five years' time that will also seem a bit hackneyed...

L14: ...well even that's only reflecting the sort of grotesqueries of Hogarth, if you want to go really back...

Q: I mean somebody at school yesterday was...I was just listening about sort of, Jimmy Jewel, all these, going back in television and music-hall...and people, tapes they've been listening to...and it occurred to me that quite a few of those had things in which were...similar to Monty Python! The sort of lines people were coming out with, the ideas that were in there...the absurd, an elephant in a box or something...

L12: ...there's quite a lot of...there's quite a lot of absurdity in in Hancock, even, isn't there...but maybe, maybe what we're saying, what we don't even know it, is that there are certain elements in humour that are there, and will always be there, and that's the human condition, you will always laugh when you're triggered off by one of these elements...and therefore, you know, it doesn't matter if you go back forty years or back to Hogarth or whatever, there are certain...

L14: ...you're talking about the universal, aren't you?

L12: things that people perennially, universally will find funny...

L14: ...Yes, that's a (?) factor...

Q: yeees...

L12: I mean I, you know...

L14: We all love you really!

L12: ...you know, I mean the porter scene in Macbeth, you know, coming out with the words he was coming out in that, which was sort of shocking, in a serious play, and so on, but the, you know the ordinary people loved it...

L14: Talking about shocks and things, remember the point we were making about rude words earlier on, actually I didn't mean that there wasn't some value in it but I think some people deliberately use that, just to shock, they say look, I'm being terribly avant-garde, I'm using...and yet coming up here on the tube this evening, there were a couple of girls discussing their boyfriends at the pub, and the language was quite avant-garde, and the whole carriage was getting the benefit of it...

L12: What do you mean avant-garde?

L14: Everything's effing and blinding, you know...

L12: But that's very boring, isn't it...

L14: Oh very very boring...

L12: ...it's a lack of imagination really, isn't it...

L14: Well it is; but you see it's a bit hypocritical really then to hear it on television and say oh, shock horror! when you've sat on the underground and you've heard that for the last...three stations...

L12: But, but it's that, though, isn't it, it's the fact that in real life you can hear swearing and you can, you can talk about certain things with your friends, but that you don't expect Establishment, especially BBC, to come out with, I mean I suppose The Young Ones really was quite something...on the BBC as Monty Python was in its time, just as the AIDS week ought to go down in history back in February, for talking and showing condoms, which is, you know...my mother said, God like you, your father would have been shocked at this and I thought yes, I suppose people get increeibly shocked at this, this is real milestone in television history, this kind of thing...but if you mix in circles where you talk about that kind of thing and you're not shocked, it's not quite so shocking to see it on television, but little, little old ladies in Eastbourne might well have been, you know...

Q: I think it's quite right that it can be used in comedy, deliberately as a device, sort of consciously, and then it... I suppose it can show through, you can see what's going on...

L12: ...yes...it comes across as false, though, doesn't it...

L14: I think so, and I think that's...and sometimes you'll all, if you hear a television or radio audience, you will always hear that, there's one or two people who give out a little titter when a certain word is used...and you think, well why, why are you laughing at that, you must come across things written on walls in the open air, on the railway, everywhere...not everyone (laughs)...

L12: But it's the context, isn't it, the context...

L14: It is the context, because somebody that...

L12: ...like Margaret Thatcher, Thatcher saying 'fuck', or something you know, I mean, it's to do with context, isn't it, and

breaking that...

L14: I wonder if she ever does!

Q: Well if Edwina Currie can...

L12: Did she?!

L5: Well apparently she told someone to fuck off, didn't she...

L12: Did she? really? (laughs)

L5: ...behind the scenes after an interview...a, was it an awkward question or something?

L12: But you're back to the kind of appearance and reality thing there, aren't you, the expectation, you expect a certain formality, or mode of behaviour and control with certain people, and then when you don't get that, that's where it's undercut, you see...which is why they, they like to set up their upper-class, you know, army types, you know, or whatever, who then swear or (?) bottoms or whatever it is, and then you get the cheap laugh out of it you see...

L5: Yes but that...yes, that's like undercutting whatever but I mean they would say...I don't know, there's an element of reflecting reality, what I was trying to say earlier about, often their jokes revolve around sexual fetishes...fetishists, I can't speak tonight...and,...

L12: I don't think anyone can say that word!

L5: It's fetishes, not fetishists, it's fetishes, that, you know, they were saying this is the Establishment...half the time the Establishment is public-school, and this is what's happening

L12: Yes...yes, look at the judges...

L5: ...so they're not undercutting, they're, they are giving a wholer picture, a larger picture, or something...but I mean a lot of their humour came from that, I think...

L12: Yes, I agree, it's just that your ordinary person in the street isn't always aware of that, are they...

L5: No...exactly...therefore again...(?)

L12: ...and therefore it's...educational, in that sense!

L5: ...yes, that links up with something I was saying earlier, as well, about the, are they, they're aware of, or I think Jan suggested there's two sorts of appeal...when you were saying earlier about using that structure of Meaning of Life, some sort of structure to get people into the cinema, and I was saying well maybe for a lot of people it was a joke, the actual, you know, the joke was that this is a structured film, ha ha ha, it's not at all, but it's presented as such, or...was saying do they know what they're doing...

L12: Yes, it's a question of how far removed they've become from it;

L5: ...so, with, with this public school, I think there's a lot of that, a lot of their humour is public school, or based around...if you like, almost exposing...

L12: Yes, it's a question of intent, isn't it, are they exposing it, or are they just poking fun at it, or what...

L5: Well I think, they're sort of exposing it a lot of the time, they'd like, I think, as you said, they would perceive themselves as anti-establishment, and there's nothing more, so, as establishment in Britain, as public school...

Q: Yes...there is a big distinction between what one wants to do



in terms of, you know one can want to make you know subversive jokes and be satirical, but the function it actually fulfils...

L15: ...is, can be completely different, yes, 'cos do appeal to... some of the things they do, almost as slapstick, it's very funny to see a major wearing ladies' underwear...army jacket above, and the ladies underwear...

Q: ...but also I mean in a...there are a lot of institutions which can take it, so to speak, which are big enough to be able to say, oh yes, you know, it actually can add to their, to their, yes to their, their stature, that, you know, well we can take a joke...

L14: What, the ultimate tribute being that you appear on Spitting Image...

Q: Yes.

L12: Well that's what people will say, I mean they say that because, what else can they say, you know, David Steel was asked, wasn't he, last night on Channel 4, 'what do you think?'...and I mean you can't say 'I'm deeply offended', can you...

Q: ...yes, you're a bit stuck...

L12: What can you say, you're stuck, you're cornered, aren't you... actually going back to that army sketch, I've just remembered something, you know where the, Michael Palin's the sergeant major and they all think of their excuses to get out of the square-bashing...and when we got that, I thought here we go, you know the army, and I thought we were going to go into another version of the, the gay-boy...

L14: Oh! You thought that too...(?)...

L12: Yes, (?) and I was very curious to see what they were going to do with that one, 'cos I thought they wouldn't dare do exactly the same thing, would they; but it was very popular, so they... tendency to want to do that...

L14: Do you know I'd forgotten that bit there...

L12: Had you?

L14: I didn't remember it at all, when I saw it this time...

Q: Well perhaps we've said enough...

L12: I don't think there's any more...well there might be, but... three or four o'clock in the morning and you think, oh! that's what I meant, yes...